

Tales from a
Sisters Naturalist
by Jim Anderson

Nature's digging machine

A caller from Pine Meadow Village left a message asking about a wild mammal that moved in next door and left a big hole and a large mound of what it took to make the hole.

She thought it was a badger, which from what she told me sounded correct. However, like a lot of people meeting a badger up close and personal, she was pretty apprehensive as to what to do next.

So here's a few words of advice and a little information about the badger who lives in Sisters Country:

First and foremost, badgers are predators; they make a living by eating other animals, including insects and creatures they discover while digging holes in the ground. Generally speaking, if you

leave them alone, they, in turn, will leave you alone.

I'm 90 years old and believe me, I have the scars to prove that axiom: Leave the wild animals alone who share this good earth with us, and most of the time they'll leave you alone. Be impolite, and push it, and you can end up in a lot of trouble. I had to have an ear sewed back on years ago because I invaded — with blatant disrespect — the territory of a pair of great horned owls, and the male convinced me I should have had better manners.

So, let's get to the American badger (*Taxidea taxus*). They can — as many humans have discovered — protect themselves with extreme vigor. They are armed with sharp teeth, powerful jaws, incredibly strong digging feet and claws, and in addition, because they are in the mammalian family, Mustelidae (skunks and such), they can also stink up the countryside.

The hole out in Pine Meadow — like most of the others left behind by badgers — was dug in its search for food. Badgers have a very good sense of smell, and when they pick up the scent of what is becoming our new and not so nice neighbors, the Belding ground squirrel, they begin to drool and start

digging into the bedroom of said ground squirrels and eat as many as they can.

I say ground squirrels are not very nice neighbors as they are known carriers of the fleas that carry the bubonic plague. I don't know about you, but I'd rather have a neighbor who eats ground squirrels than one who associates with fleas that transmit some very nasty diseases.

Horse people can, however, tell you how badgers can wreak havoc with the hole-digging business. It is, unfortunately, not uncommon for a horse to fall into a badger hole and break a leg.

Badger holes are used by coyotes as a beginning of a den in which to raise puppies. Burrowing owls will also use badger holes as their homes to raise their babies. In fact, the relationship between burrowing owls and badgers is like the Columbia River and ocean-going salmon; one is very dependent upon the other.

Badgers are champions of going into the earth quickly and vanishing completely. Nature put them together that way. They're built close to the ground; their front paws tear up soil and plants like jackhammers, and their back paws are like powerful shovels that send soil and rocks flying, and the animal

virtually sinks into the ground.

In Oregon, American badgers occur throughout the region east of the Cascade Range and in eastern Jackson County wherever prey is abundant. They are largely nocturnal but are occasionally seen abroad during daylight hours.

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife classifies badgers as unprotected mammals, along with coyotes, gophers, moles, mountain beaver, striped skunks, and weasels.

Anyone can shoot and kill badgers anywhere they are allowed to use a firearm.

Because of the badger's diminishing numbers, in May of 2000, the Canadian Species at Risk Act listed both *Taxidea taxus jacksoni* and *jeffersoni* badgers as a subspecies, and the California Department of Fish and Game designated the American badger as a California species of special

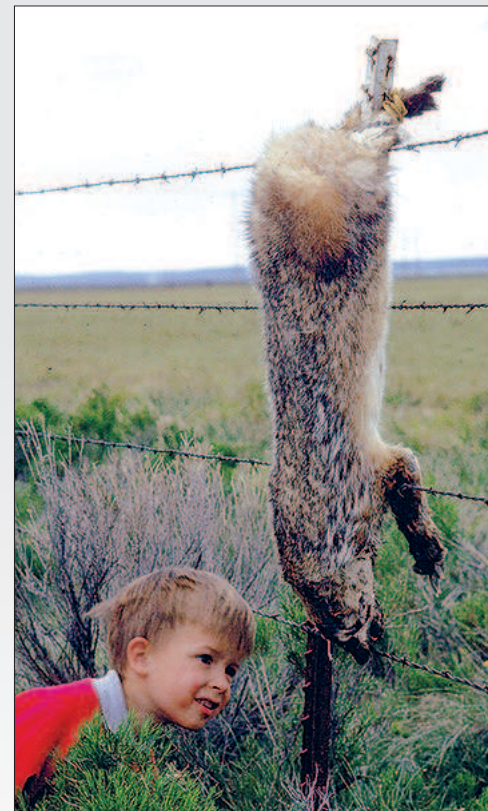


PHOTO BY JIM ANDERSON

Caleb Anderson, author's son, investigating a dead badger hung on a fence far out on the Great Sandy Desert.

concern.

It is my opinion, after spending the last 50 years prowling about the Great Sandy Desert all spring, and recent golden eagle studies and not seeing but one or two badgers per season, that without some type of protection the remaining American badgers living in Oregon will end up a species of concern very soon as well.

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