

SEQUOIA NATURE GUIDE SERVICE

THE CALIFORNIA BADGER

The California Badger (*Taxidea taxus neglecta*) is a vanishing species. The animals are yielding rapidly before cultivation, settlement and wanton killing, so that in much of the territory formerly occupied the badger is seen no more. Man is practically the only enemy of the badger, and unfortunately kills this useful animal at every opportunity and almost always without any good reason. Some 50 years ago the animals were fairly abundant throughout their range, but the ever increasing occupation by man of their territory and his hostile attitude has reduced them from year to year, and, if continued unchecked, must lead to the extermination of an animal at once picturesque and useful.

Family and Distribution of the Badger: The badger belongs to the weasel family and is the third largest of that family in North America, only being exceeded in size by the wolverine and the otter. The badger's former home was in the great plains of North America, the Rocky Mountains and westward to the Pacific Coast, from the southern table-lands and Puebla Mexico on the south to Peace River in Canada on the north. The animals have been much depleted or exterminated over most of their eastern range, but in the west they are still holding forth. In California the animals inhabit sparingly the more favored spots from sea level to elevations of 10,500 feet. They seem more abundant in the High Sierras, where they live in the more open country and meadow lands. They have been driven to high altitudes by persecution, and remain there because of the wildness of the country and the protection they are given within the National Parks. Generally speaking, badgers are plains animals and do not favor heavy forest belts.

Description of the Badger: The badger is an animal of strange form and habits. It is short and flat bodied, very low in stature, with a broad, flat-shaped head which joins directly onto the body, with no defined neck. The jaws are strong and pointed and set with heavy teeth. The legs are short and heavy, with unusually large feet armored with long heavy claws. The nose is well pointed; tail short and drooping; eyes small, dark, glittering; ears small, rounded, set well down upon the sides of the head back of and slightly below the level of the eyes. The body length is about 24 inches, height about 12 inches, weight about 17 pounds. The fur is unique and beautiful, being mixed with black, white, yellow and gray. The body is a grizzled gray, slightly tinged with yellowish brown with a narrow white stripe extending from the nose over top of head to shoulders. Sides of head white with black spot on each cheek. Upper part of the head each side of the white stripes, nose and feet, black.

The animals have a sullen and savage disposition towards other than their own kin. I do not mean from this that the badgers go about molesting or attacking other animals, for this they never do. But they do not respond to kind treatment and seldom become good pets. They always avoid trouble like all the weasel family, but when once attacked they fight viciously and effectively. When attacked, they neither quail nor hesitate, but throw every ounce of energy into the battle; while agile as cats they hang on in bulldog fashion. What the badger wants is to be let strictly alone, so as to obey his natural impulse in his search for food. Every muscle of the badger shows tremendous strength. This, together with the dark, glittering eyes, gives the animal an expression of both intelligence and power. In my opinion, for fighting qualities, measured by size, the badger is only outclassed by the wolverine. The dog that inadvertently attacks a badger is sure to be severely cut and slashed by the animal's sharp teeth before he can escape. Badgers are shy, sullen, sensitive and capricious animals.

Breeding Habits of the Badger. Badgers are not prolific breeders. The young range from one to four in number, and it is doubtful if more than a single litter is produced each year. The little badgers are born in underground burrows and in beds without nest-linings. When first born they are shaped like

adults, but are much lighter and of undefined color. Their eyes are closed, no teeth are visible, soles of feet are black and toes have tiny white claws. They grow rapidly and usually make a first appearance above ground at the age of about three weeks. When less than half grown, the mother weans her young but continues to catch food for them until they are almost two-thirds grown, then she leaves them to shift for themselves.

The breeding season of the badger for this locality is irregular, owing to varying altitudes and climate conditions. For instance, in the San Joaquin Valley at elevation of 500 feet young are born in February and March, while at Twin Lakes, in Sequoia National Park, at elevation of 10,500 feet young are born in April and May. These same conditions regulate to an extent the time and duration of the badgers' hibernating period.

I have been fortunate in several personal experiences with badgers. One evening, on June 22, 1912, I came upon a mother badger and her two young in Willow Meadow, Sequoia National Park, elevation 7,500 feet, where they lived in seclusion and thrived on small rodents which the mother caught in the meadow. The young were about the size of a full grown Fisher ground squirrel, and to all appearance about three weeks old. When first I saw them, they were off a few feet from their burrow, the mother lying on the ground with her young rolling over in play in front of her. They did not see me, so I crawled up on their leeward side behind some willow bushes that shielded me and were within about 30 feet of them. In a few moments the two young badgers returned to their home under ground, and the mother strolled from my sight across the meadow for her evening hunt. I decided that the entertainment was all over and was moving on, when to my surprise and gratification both the baby badgers toddled from the burrow and resumed their play. I watched their frolic for a few moments, then ran quickly to the burrow, jumped on it with both feet and sat down flat over the entrance before the young badgers realized what was happening.

Never have I seen young wild animals more mystified than were these baby badgers by my presence. Instead of dashing away in any direction that was open, as do most young wild animals under similar circumstances, they first fell flat upon the ground for a few seconds, then came direct to me, calmly looking at me, wonderingly and inquiringly but with practically no signs of fear; then straightway, true to their kind, they began to dig under me in an effort to regain entrance to their subterranean home.

On several occasions I took the badgers in my hands and tossed them out into the grass a few feet from me, but on each occasion they would quickly return uttering soft, wheezy grunting sounds and making frantic efforts to reenter their burrow. They were not strong enough to do me any damage, but they gave a marvelous display of frantic motions of every kind, and showed excellent skill with their claws in both scratching and digging. They also demonstrated an animal of persistent thought and determined effort.

Having amused myself with the animals for some little time, the young badgers were permitted to return to the home whence they came, and I took my departure. When away a distance of some one hundred yards, I saw the mother badger coming in from her evening hunt with some kind of rodent in her mouth. She soon passed from my sight into her terrestrial home to rejoin her much disturbed but anxiously awaiting offspring.

Badgers have but few social ties aside from those of the mother and her young, and during the mating period. I have never yet observed any instance of the male badger helping to care for the young or taking any interest whatsoever in household affairs. However, in a few instances I have seen both a male and female living in the same burrow.

Feeding Habits and Usefulness to Man: The badgers feed on ground rodents of every description, and on a great variety of insects. They are not gifted with either speed or stealth to aid them in obtaining food supply, and are forced to dig and capture practically all their prey under ground. Their principal diet is gophers, ground squirrels, rats and mice. They are skilful in locating the

burrows of their quarry and the inhabitants soon fall victim owing to the badgers rapid digging. Indeed, he is so destructive to rodents that prey on vegetation that the badger's services are more beneficial to agriculture than those of any other of our North American mammals.

Badgers are largely nocturnal in habit and hunt chiefly at night, but when forced by hunger they will hunt by day. They wander far and wide in search of food at night, but usually return to their burrows by sunrise in the morning. They move around little except in search of food, and when it becomes scarce they simply move on to a new territory where food is more plentiful, and the first thing they do is to dig a new burrow in which to live and shelter from enemies.

Man, the Badger's Worst Enemy: The worst enemy the badger has is man. I have never found evidence that badgers have lost their lives through any other enemy, except large savage domestic dogs. Large birds of prey and carnivorous wild animals seem to leave the badgers strictly alone. I do not know whether this is due to the savage fighting qualities of the badger, or whether the flesh of the badger is distasteful as food, or both; but believe it is due to the former cause, for the badger's thick fur and tough skin are hard to penetrate, and when the animals once engage in combat they will fight to the death.

Delvers of the Earth: Of all our North American mammals, badgers hold the record for rapid digging. On September 2, 1912, while at Mitchell Meadow, Sequoia National Park, elevation 8,500 feet, we came suddenly upon a large badger some 100 yards from his den. We shut off his return to his burrow and chased him for a few moments on horseback. No sooner did we stop our chase than the badger dug into the ground and did the fastest job of digging of any animal I have ever seen. Although the ground was hard and somewhat crusted with sod, the badger dug himself completely from our sight and plugged the hole behind him with dirt in less than one and one-half minutes. In excavating, his whole being was brought into action; he used all four of his feet, as well as his mouth, with great skill and determination.

Should the Badger be Protected or Exterminated? To me the California badger is one of our most interesting and beneficial animals. It should be given protection. At present the only shelter the animals have is within our National Parks. Here there is perhaps sufficient seed stock left to insure perpetuation of the species within a given area for some time to come. But when the animals pass beyond the boundaries of the parks, they soon fall victim to hunters and trappers. Furthermore, the animals have never been proven guilty of destructiveness. The worst harm which they have ever been accused of doing to man is that the burrows they dig, on occasions, have caused horses to stumble and fall with their riders. But as compensation for this the badger hunts and kills rodents that are harmful to crops and other growing vegetation 365 days each year of his life.

The wanton destruction of this picturesque and beneficial species of California mammal life is unwarranted and unjustifiable. It should be stopped. Let us have it said that California is the one safe spot in this vast republic that may be called the badger's last home; a spot where the animals are given the right to live out their lives according to their destiny in peace; a right of a harmless and useful animal that man is in duty bound morally to respect.

No moral law is ever violated with impunity. Man is paying for his brutality to the badger in the plagues of rodents which God created the badger especially to prevent. Give the badger a chance and he'll clean up the ground squirrels, gophers and other rodents which destroy California's crops.