Badger

Taxidea taxus (tax-ID-ee-uh TAX-us)
Tax = "to arrange" *idea* = "a thing's appearance" *taxus* = "badger"

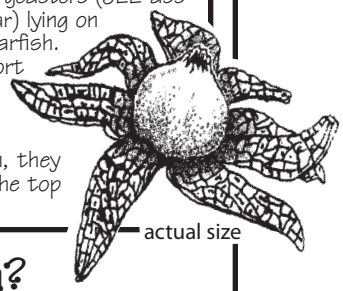
The badger, weighing in at 15 to 25 pounds, is the "tank" of the animal world. It is low and squatty, well-armed, and heavily protected -- you wouldn't want to meet a badger in a dark tunnel. Most of the critters who *do* end up as lunch.

Digging with its sturdy 2" front claws, and pushing the dirt backward with its flat, shovel-shaped back claws, the badger throws up a plume of dirt behind it and disappears into the ground in seconds. A mound of dirt, three to eight feet across and up to two feet high with an entrance the size and shape of a squashed basketball, is probably a "badger dig." It could be the badger's den, descending six to ten feet, or it may be where it dug up a snack. Badgers eat mostly rodents -- ground squirrels, chipmunks, gophers, prairie dogs, kangaroo rats and mice.

Badgers are members of the carnivorous weasel family, *Mustelidæ* (mus-TELL-ih-dee), and are related to skunks, black-footed ferrets, otters, wolverines and, of course, weasels.

Geaster

Watch for geasters (JEE-ass-ters, *ge* = earth, *aster* = star) lying on the sand like potbellied starfish. A geaster is a puffball, a sort of mushroom, whose cover has peeled away like rays of a star from its round spore sac. When the spores ripen, they puff out through a hole in the top of the ball and drift **away**.



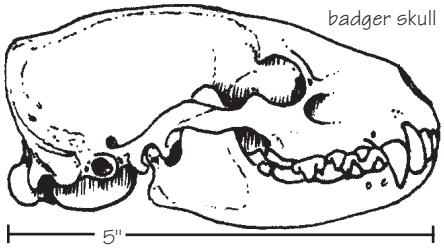
Myth or Truth?

For years Westerners have told about coyotes and badgers hunting together, with the badger doing the digging, and sharing with the coyote whatever it digs up. Navajos have legends about Badger and Coyote cooperating. Cowboys and ranchers told similar stories, but they seemed to be just more of those "Aw, c'mon!" sort of tall tales. But a badger biologist doing a study in Wyoming recently discovered that

coyotes really DO hang out with badgers.

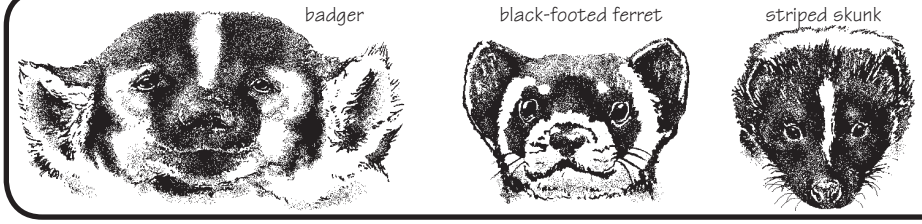
With longer legs and keener eyes, a coyote will actually locate a distant rodent (like a ground squirrel or prairie dog) and lead the badger to it. The badger starts digging and follows the rodent underground – sometimes 9 - 10 feet down. With a coyote waiting outside to grab it, the rodent is afraid to come out -- so the badger has a better chance of catching it underground. But if a desperate rodent DOES pop out, it's *history*. In fact, coyotes hunting with badgers catch about a third more rodents than coyotes hunting alone. And that's no myth.

A Hardheaded Hunter



The badger has an extremely tough skull. It *needs* one. A badger uses its head as a shovel to push dirt aside, and sometimes as a wedge to force small tunnels open. A badger's heavy-duty skull weighs almost *twice* as much (about 4 ounces) as a raccoon skull the same size (about 2 ½ ounces).

Masked Stinkers



Many members of the weasel family are boldly marked (more about this on page 50). Here are three, all of which have well-developed scent glands. *Particularly* the "fragrant" skunk.

badger track & scat

Chapter 11. The Desert Woodrat

Blue shadows deepened around the big boulder that hid the bobcat. On its far side, spilling out onto the sand from a narrow crack in the cliff, was a huge woodrat nest. Coyote scat, bones, and owl pellets littered the entrance, along with cactus chunks bristling with spines. The sharp spines could make any approach to the nest quite painful to predators. The sprawling nest had been inhabited by woodrat families for hundreds of years.

Five woodrats lurked inside the three entrances of the nest waiting for dark. Eyes alert, big ears swiveling, the woodrats watched and listened for danger. The shadows deepened. The hidden bobcat waited silently.

The boldest young woodrat crept out of the nest, whiskers twitching alertly. He picked his way past the cactus spines and scrambled up into a sagebrush to eat some flowers. The next young rat slipped out and climbed into a cactus which had thick, delicious pads, carefully nipping away the sharp spine tips before taking each step. The other rats scurried about harvesting flowers in nearby shrubs.

The mother woodrat was last to come out. Her belly bulged, for she would soon bear a new litter of rat pups. After eating some tender new leaves, she nipped a small cactus pad from a low-hanging prickly pear cactus and waddled with it back to the nest – past a great horned owl pellet, part of a mule deer fawn's *vertebra* (VER-teh-bruh – backbone), and an old woodrat jawbone. A few feet away, the boldest young rat busily dragged a rabbit leg bone through the sand toward the nest with a faint, scratching rustle. Just as the mother rat reached an entrance, the bobcat sprang from behind the boulder. A shrill rat squeak split the air and the mother woodrat was sprayed with sand and trash as she bolted safely into the entry.

Later that night, three woodrats sniffed around in the moonlight for their brother -- the one who had always gone out first and wandered farthest away from the nest. But he would never be seen again.

Further up the canyon, in the soft sand under an overhanging rock, whiskers and velvet paws twitched as the young bobcat slept off his woodrat dinner. He had found a very fine territory indeed.