

# THE CHALLENGE OF BADGERS

Badgers occur throughout Montana wherever ground squirrels and prairies dogs are present.

by Stephen Vantassel

Vertebrate Pest Specialist, Montana Department of Agriculture



## Badger Biology

Badgers (*Taxidea taxus*) are medium-sized predators (14-17 pounds) that have a white vertical stripe that extends from the nose, between the eyes, and across the forehead. Gray, black, and brown fur gives their low profile bodies an overall grayish appearance. They have bushy 5-6 inch tails and a body length of 22-23 inches. Badgers mate between May and August and females give birth to one to five young between February and May of the following year. Males do not participate in rearing young. Juveniles disperse during the mating season or by fall.

Badgers occur throughout Montana wherever ground squirrels and prairie dogs are abundant. They use powerful front legs with 1-inch claws to dig up burrowing prey. Most landowners see only the 8-plus inch diameter holes and mound of excavated soil characteristic of badger hunting activity the previous night. What isn't seen is the remarkable speed at which the badger dug that hole.

The number of badgers in an area depends mainly on the availability of prey. In ideal habitats, a badger's home-range can be as small as 0.15 square miles, but one to three square miles is more common.



## Damage by Badgers

Badger holes and the resultant mounds of excavated soil reduce production, damage harvesting equipment, and visually scar the landscape. In some instances, badger digging can undermine the integrity of dikes and similar structures raising significant safety concerns. Poultry producers may experience predation if pens are not sufficiently strong enough to prevent badger entry.

The claim that livestock may injure themselves by stepping into badger holes has little evidence to support it, as cattle and similar livestock seem able to avoid these holes. Galloping horses, however, are an exception. Riders should avoid fast speeds in areas where badgers are present.

## Management of Badger Damage

When discussing management of badger damage, it is important to emphasize that the problem for landowners is not primarily the badger, but its digging. If you are not experiencing badger damage on your landscape, then there is no reason to kill badgers preemptively. In fact, preemptive killing is likely to increase the likelihood that land will be invaded by ground squirrels because of reduced predatory pressure on ground squirrels elsewhere.

The most efficient way to stop badger damage over the long-term is to remove their prey. Research has shown that badger activity drops following reductions in the numbers of ground squirrels and prairie dogs. Simply put, "no food, no badgers." Details on how to control ground squirrels and prairie dogs can be obtained from the Montana Department of Agriculture's website at <http://agr.mt.gov/Programs/PestMgt/VertebratePest/Bulletins/>. MSU Extension also has Montguides on ground squirrel and pocket gopher control at <http://store.msuextension.org> Unfortunately, control of

prey species can be expensive and time consuming. If rapid, but short-term, results are required, then landowners should consider the methods mentioned below.

In Montana, badgers may be hunted or trapped throughout the year. Always obtain permission from the landowner before initiating control measures. There are no pesticides registered for control of badgers.

## Trapping

Trapping badgers requires diligence, proper equipment, and correct trap placement. Trap when badgers are active, typically in warmer months. Winter trapping is not advisable for inexperienced trappers because badgers may den up for weeks at a time. Select trap sites carefully as traps can injure non-target animals like free-ranging pets and skunks. Always consider the potential for non-target capture before deciding to use traps. Badgers may be caught in baited or blind sets. Baited sets use an attractant such as food, urine, or animal glands to draw the badger to the trap. Since baited sets increase the risk of non-target captures, blind sets, which do not use bait, may be a preferred option.

In blind sets, traps are placed where the badger is expected to travel. Locate fresh badger digging, identified by the 8-inch tall and 9-inch wide hole that extends well into the ground. Ignore holes where you can see the bottom, but be sure to distinguish between holes that are plugged and holes that are shallow. Badgers may plug the burrows they occupy. Identify plugged holes by probing the obstruction with a long pole. If the stick breaks through, you have found a plugged hole. Avoid placing traps over plugged holes, as badgers may trigger or bury traps as they push out soil. Instead, set traps in holes created nearby that the badger will investigate. Place a 220-sized conibear-style trap (330 size can also be used) in the hole with trigger wires pointing down. Ensure that the jaws will close freely. Secure the conibear-style trap in place with three, 24-inch re-rod T-stakes. Place two stakes between the jaws in a criss-cross fashion to stabilize the trap in the burrow or use a manufactured stabilizer (see photo). Use the third stake to secure the trap chain.

If you prefer footholds, use traps sized 1.75 to 3. Ensure that the trap has an 18-inch long chain that has at least three swivels. Chain and swivels should be suitable for catching coyotes or larger animals. Do not use inferior equipment. Dig a small depression on one side of the burrow (not in the

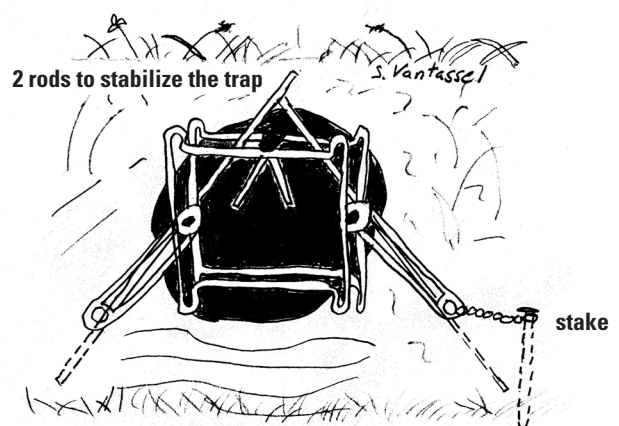
middle), large enough to fit the trap. Bed the trap so it lies on the ground without wobbling. Cut a piece of waxed paper large enough to fit inside the jaws of the set trap. Place the paper over the trap pan and cover the trap with soil. The paper prevents soil from sliding under the pan which would prevent the trap from firing. Stake the trap with a 24-inch long re-bar stake (or longer) as far away from the entrance of the burrow as the chain will allow. The reason for this is to prevent the trapped badger from reentering the burrow.

Check traps every morning they are set. Badgers caught in conibear-style traps will usually be found dead. Use a .22 caliber rifle to dispatch live badgers caught in footholds, provided it is safe and legal to shoot in the area.

## Shooting

Most badgers killed by shooting are taken as targets of opportunity rather than by planned hunting. Always follow firearms laws and safety recommendations when using firearms. Shotguns (#4 shot or larger) and rifles (.22 cal or larger) will take badgers with proper projectile placement. Hunting badgers at night with spotlights can improve hunting success. Identify badgers by their movements and green eye shine. Hunt into the wind. Dogs can be helpful but care needs to be taken that the dogs avoid engaging with the badger. Badgers have loose skin, so if the dog bites, the badger will often have enough freedom to turn and bite the dog and cause significant injury.

If you are interested in learning more about badgers or other vertebrate pests, or to schedule presentations, training, and consultation on issues related to the management of vertebrate pests, contact Stephen Vantassel at 406-538-3004 or by e-mail [svantassel@mt.gov](mailto:svantassel@mt.gov). ■



**220 CONIBEAR**