American Badger

CHARACTERS.

Colour above, hoary-yellowish-brown; a broad white longitudinal line dividing the head above into two equal parts; dull white, beneath; legs and feet, black.

SYNONYMES.

CARCAJOU, Buffon, tom. vi., p. 117, pl. 23.

COMMON BADGER, Pennant's Arctic Zool., vol. i., p. 71.

BADGER, Var. B. AMERICAN, Penn. Hist. Quad., vol. ii., p. 15.

URSUS TAXUS, Schreber, Säugeth., p. 520.

" LABRADORIUS, Gmel., vol. i., p. 102.

PRAROW, Gass, Journal, p. 34.

BLAIREAU, Lewis and Clarke, vol. i., pp. 50, 137, 213.

TAXUS LABRADORICUS, Long's Expedition, vol. i., p. 261.

MELES LABRADORIA, Sabine, Franklin's First Journey, p. 649.

AMERICAN BADGER, Harlan, F., p. 57.

" " Godm., vol. i., p. 179.

BLAIREAU D'AMERIQUE, F. Cuvier, Hist. Nat. des Mamm.

MELES LABRADORIA, Richardson, F. B. A., pl. 2.

" " Waterhouse, Trans. Zool. Soc., London, vol. ii., p. 1, p. 343.

DESCRIPTION.

There is a very striking difference between the teeth of this species and those of the European Badger, (*Meles vulgaris*;) besides which, the present species has one tooth less than the latter on each side in the lower jaw. We have ascertained, by referring to three skulls in our possession, that the dentition of the American Badger corresponds so minutely with the scientific and accurate account given of it by WATERHOUSE, in the Transactions of the Zool. Society of London, vol. ii., part 5, p. 343, that we are willing to adopt his conclusions.

He says: "The subgeneric name, TAXIDEA, may be applied to the American Badger, and such species as may hereafter be discovered with incisors $\frac{2}{3}$; canines $\frac{1}{1}$; false molars $\frac{2}{2}$ — $\frac{2}{2}$, the posterior false molar of the lower jaw, with an anterior large tubercle, and a posterior smaller one; molars $\frac{3}{2}$ — $\frac{3}{2}$; the carnassière and the grinding molars of the upper jaw each of a triangular form, or nearly so, and about equal in size. The modification observable in the form of the molars of the upper jaw of TAXIDEA, furnishes us with an interesting link between MEPHITIS and MELES, whilst the former of these genera links the Badger with MUSTELA and its subgenera."

The body of this species is thick, heavy, flat, very broad and fleshy,

and its whole structure indicates that it is formed more for strength than speed.

Head, of moderate size, and conical; the skull, between the ears, broad, giving it somewhat the appearance of a pug-faced dog. Tip of the nose, hairy above; ears, short, and of an oval shape, clothed on both surfaces with short hairs; whiskers, few, not reaching beyond the eyes. The fur on the back is (in winter) three inches long, covering the body very densely; on the under surface it is short, and so thin that it does not conceal the colour of the skin. There is, immediately below the tail, a large aperture leading into a kind of sac. Although there seems to be no true glandular apparatus, this cavity is covered on its sides by an unctuous matter; there is a second and smaller underneath, in the midst of which the anus opens, and on each side of the anus is a pore from which an unctuous matter escapes, which is of a yellow colour and offensive smell. Legs, short; feet, robust, palmated to the outer joint; nails, long and strong, slightly arched, and channelled underneath toward their extremities; palms, naked. The heel is well clothed with hair; the tail is short, and is covered with long bushy hairs.

COLOUR.

Hair on the back, at the roots dark-gray, then light-yellow for two-thirds of its length, then black, and broadly tipped with white; giving it in winter a hoary-gray appearance; but in summer it makes a near approach to yellowish-brown. The eyes are bright piercing black. Whiskers, upper lips, nose, forehead, around the eyes, and to the back of the head, dark yellowish-brown. There is a white stripe running from the nose over the forehead and along the middle of the neck to the shoulder. Upper surface of ear, dark brown; inner surface and outer edge of ear, white; legs, blackish-brown; nails, pale horn-colour; sides of face, white, which gradually darkens and unites with the brown colour above; chin and throat, dull white; the remainder of the under surface is yellowish-white; tail, yellowish-brown.

We have noticed some varieties in this species. In one of the specimens before us the longitudinal white line does not reach below the eyes, leaving the nose and forehead dark yellowish-brown. In two of them the under surface of the body is yellowish-white, with a broad and irregular longitudinal line of white in the centre; whilst another and smaller specimen has the whole of the under surface pure white, shaded on the sides by a line of light yellow.

DIMENSIONS.

A male in winter pelage.

From point of nose to root of tail,	-	-	-	-	-	21 inches.
Tail, (vertebræ,)	-	-	-	-	-	4 do.
“ to end of hair,	-	-	-	-	-	6½ do.
Nose to root of ear,	-	-	-	-	-	3⅝ do.
Between the ears,	-	-	-	-	-	4 do.
Height of “	-	-	-	-	-	1¼ do.
Breadth of “	-	-	-	-	-	1⅔ do.
Length of head,	-	-	-	-	-	4⅝ do.
Breadth of body,	-	-	-	-	-	10½ do.
Length of fore-leg to end of claw,	-	-	-	-	-	7¼ do.

Weight, 16½ lbs.

A living specimen, (examined in a menagerie at Charleston, S. Carolina.)

Length of head and body,	-	-	-	-	-	30 inches.
“ tail, (vertebræ,)	-	-	-	-	-	5 do.
“ “ to end of hair,	-	-	-	-	-	7½ do.
Breadth of body,	-	-	-	-	-	12 do.
Heel to end of nail,	-	-	-	-	-	4 do.

Weight, 23 lbs.

A stuffed specimen in our collection.

Length of head and body,	-	-	-	-	-	31 inches.
“ tail, (vertebræ,)	-	-	-	-	-	5½ do.
“ “ to end of hair,	-	-	-	-	-	7½ do.
“ heel to end of nail,	-	-	-	-	-	4½ do.

HABITS.

During our stay at Fort Union, on the Upper Missouri River, in the summer of 1843, we purchased a living Badger from a squaw, who had brought it from some distance to the Fort for sale; it having been caught by another squaw at a place nearly two hundred and fifty miles away, among the Crow Indians. It was first placed in our common room, but was found to be so very mischievous, pulling about and tearing to pieces every article within its reach, trying to dig up the stones of the hearth, &c., that we had it removed into an adjoining apartment. It was regularly fed morning and evening on raw meat, either the flesh of animals procured by our hunters, or small birds shot during our researches through the adjacent country. It drank a good deal of water, and was rather

cleanly in its habits. In the course of a few days it managed to dig a hole under the hearth and fire-place nearly large and deep enough to conceal its body, and we were obliged to drag it out by main force whenever we wished to examine it. It was provoked at the near approach of any one, and growled continuously at all intruders. It was not, however, very vicious, and would suffer one or two of our companions to handle and play with it at times.

At that period this Badger was about five months old, and was nearly as large as a full grown wood-chuck or ground-hog, (*Arctomys monax*.) Its fur was of the usual colour of summer pelage, and it was quite a pretty looking animal. We concluded to bring it to New-York alive, if possible, and succeeded in doing so after much trouble, it having nearly made its escape more than once. On one occasion when our boat was made fast to the shore for the night, and we were about to make our "camp," the Badger gnawed his way out of the box in which he was confined, and began to range over the batteau; we rose as speedily as possible, and striking a light, commenced a chase after it with the aid of one of the hands, and caught it by casting a buffalo robe over it. The cage next day was wired, and bits of tin put in places where the wooden bars had been gnawed through, so that the animal could not again easily get out of its prison. After having become accustomed to the box, the Badger became quite playful and took exercise by rolling himself rapidly from one end to the other, and then back again with a reversed movement, continuing this amusement sometimes for an hour or two.

On arriving at our residence near New-York, we had a large box, tinned on the inside, let into the ground about two feet and a half and filled to the same depth with earth. The Badger was put into it, and in a few minutes made a hole, in which he seemed quite at home, and where he passed most of his time during the winter, although he always came out to take his food and water, and did not appear at all sluggish or inclined to hibernate even when the weather was so cold as to make it necessary to pour hot water into the pan that was placed within his cage, to enable him to drink, as cold water would have frozen immediately, and in fact the pan generally had a stratum of ice on the bottom which the hot water dissolved when poured in at feeding-time.

Our Badger was fed regularly, and soon grew very fat; its coat changed completely, became woolly and of a buff-brown colour, and the fur by the month of February had become indeed the most effectual protection against cold that can well be imagined.

We saw none of these animals in our hunting expeditions while on our journey up the Missouri River, and observed only a few burrowing

places which we supposed were the remains of their holes, but which were at that time abandoned. We were informed that these animals had burrows six or seven feet deep running beneath the ground at that depth to the distance of more than thirty feet. The Indians speak of their flesh as being good; that of the one of which we have been speaking, when the animal was killed, looked very white and fat, but we omitted to taste it.

Before taking leave of this individual we may remark, that the change of coat during winter from a *hairy* or furry texture to a woolly covering, is to be observed in the Rocky-mountain sheep, (*Ovis montana*), and in other animals exposed in that season to intense cold. Thus the skin of *Ovis montana*, when obtained pending the change from winter to summer pelage, will have the outside hairs grown out beyond the wool that has retained the necessary warmth in the animal during the cold weather. The *wool* begins to drop out in early spring, leaving in its place a coat of hair resembling that of the elk or common deer, thus giving as a peculiarity of certain species a *change* of pelage, quite different in character from the ordinary thickening of the coat or hair, common to all furred animals in winter, and observed by every one,—for instance, in the horse, the cow, &c., which shed their winter coats in the spring.

We had an opportunity in Charleston of observing almost daily for a fortnight, the habits of a Badger in a menagerie; he was rather gentle, and would suffer himself to be played with and fondled by his keeper, but did not appear as well pleased with strangers; he occasionally growled at us, and would not suffer us to examine him without the presence and aid of his keeper.

In running, his fore-feet crossed each other, and his body nearly touched the ground. The heel did not press on the earth like that of the bear, but was only slightly elevated above it. He resembled the Maryland marmot in running, and progressed with about the same speed. We have never seen any animal that could exceed him in digging. He would fall to work with his strong feet and long nails, and in a minute bury himself in the earth, and would very soon advance to the end of a chain ten feet in length. In digging, the hind, as well as the fore-feet, were at work, the latter for the purpose of excavating, and the former, (like paddles,) for expelling the earth out of the hole, and nothing seemed to delight him more than burrowing in the ground; he seemed never to become weary of this kind of amusement; when he had advanced to the length of his chain he would return and commence a fresh gallery near the mouth of the first hole; thus he would be occupied for hours, and it was necessary to drag him away by main force. He lived on good terms

with the raccoon, gray fox, prairie wolf, and a dozen other species of animals. He was said to be active and playful at night, but he seemed rather dull during the day, usually lying rolled up like a ball, with his head under his body for hours at a time.

This Badger did not refuse bread, but preferred meat, making two meals during the day, and eating about half a pound at each.

We occasionally saw him assuming rather an interesting attitude, raising the fore-part of his body from the earth, drawing his feet along his sides, sitting up in the manner of the marmot, and turning his head in all directions to make observations.

The Badger delights in taking up his residence in sandy prairies, where he can indulge his extravagant propensity for digging. As he lives upon the animals he captures, he usually seeks out the burrows of the various species of marmots, spermophiles, ground-squirrels, &c., with which the prairies abound; into these he penetrates, enlarging them to admit his own larger body, and soon overtaking and devouring the terrified inmates. In this manner the prairies become so filled with innumerable Badger-holes, that when the ground is covered with snow they prove a great annoyance to horsemen.

RICHARDSON informs us that early in the spring when they first begin to stir abroad they may be easily caught by pouring water into the holes, the ground at that time being so frozen that the water cannot escape through the sand, but soon fills the hole and its tenant is obliged to come out.

The Badger, like the Maryland marmot, is a rather slow and timid animal, retreating to its burrow as soon as it finds itself pursued. When once in its snug retreat, no dexterity in digging can unearth it. RICHARDSON states that "the strength of its fore-feet and claws is so great, that one which had insinuated only its head and shoulders into a hole, resisted the utmost efforts of two stout young men, who endeavoured to drag it out by the hind-legs and tail, until one of them fired the contents of his fowling-piece into its body."

This species is believed to be more carnivorous than that of Europe, (*Meles taxus*.) RICHARDSON states that a female which he had killed had a small marmot nearly entire, together with some field-mice, in its stomach, and that it had at the same time been eating some vegetables. As in its dentition it approaches the skunk, which is very decidedly carnivorous in habit, we should suppose that its principal food in its wild state is meat.

From November to April the American Badger remains in its burrow, scarcely ever showing itself above ground; here it passes its time in

a state of semi-torpidity. It cannot, however, be a very sound sleeper in winter, as not only the individual which we examined in Charleston, but even that which we kept in New-York, continued tolerably active through the winter. During the time of their long seclusion they do not lose much flesh, as they are represented to be very fat on coming abroad in spring. As this, however, is the pairing season, they, like other animals of similar habits, soon become lean.

The American Badger is said to produce from three to five young at a litter.

Several European writers, and among the more recent, GRIFFITH, in his *Animal Kingdom*, have represented the Badger as leading a most gloomy and solitary life; but we are not to suppose from the subterranean habits of this species that it is necessarily a dull and unhappy creature. Its fat sides are certainly no evidence of suffering or misery, and its form is well adapted to the life it is destined to lead. It is, like nearly all our quadrupeds, nocturnal in its habits, hence it appears dull during the day, and cannot endure a bright light. To a being constituted like man, it would be a melancholy lot to live by digging underground, shunning the light of day, and only coming forth under the shadow of night; but for this life the Badger was formed, and he could not be happy in any other. We believe that a wise Providence has created no species which, from the nature of its organization, must necessarily be miserable; and we should, under all circumstances, rather distrust our short-sighted views than doubt the wisdom and infinite benevolence of the Creator.

GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION.

The American Badger has a very extensive range. It has been traced as far north as the banks of Peace River, and the sources of the River of the Mountains, in latitude 58°. It abounds in the neighbourhood of Carlton-House, and on the waters that flow into Lake Winnipeg.

LEWIS and CLARK, and TOWNSEND, found it on the open plains of the Columbia, and also on the prairies east of the Rocky Mountains.

We have not been able to trace it within a less distance from the Atlantic than the neighbourhood of Fort Union. To the south we have seen specimens which were said to have come from the eastern side of the Rocky Mountains, in latitude 36°. There is a specimen in the collection of the London Zoological Society, the skull of which was described and figured by WATERHOUSE, that was stated to have been received from Mexico. It is probable that the *Flacoyole* of FERNANDEZ, which was described as existing in Mexico, is the same species. There is also another

specimen in the museum of the Zoological Society of London, that was brought by DOUGLASS, which is believed to have come from California.

It is very doubtful whether it exists on the eastern side of the American continent.

We are not aware that it has ever been found either in upper or Lower Canada, and we could obtain no knowledge of it in our researches at Labrador.

GENERAL REMARKS.

The difference between the European and American species of Badger is so great that it is unnecessary to institute a very particular comparison. Our species may be distinguished from that of Europe by its muzzle being hairy above, whilst it is naked in the other; the forelimbs are stouter, and the claws stronger; its head is also more conical in form. The European species has more conspicuous ears; it has three broad white marks, one on the top of the head, and one on each side, and between them are two broad black lines, which include the eyes and ears; and the whole of the throat and under-jaw are black; whilst the throat and lower-jaw of the American species are white; there is also a broad white patch separating the black colours between the sides of the forehead and ear. There are several other marks of difference which it is unnecessary to particularize, as the species are now universally admitted to be distinct.

Sabine supposed the American Badger to be a little the smallest. There is a considerable difference among different individuals of both species, but we have on an average found the two species nearly equal in size. Mr. SABINE'S American specimen was a small one, measuring two feet two inches in body. BUFFON'S specimen was two feet four inches. One of ours was two feet seven. On the other hand, SHAW gives the length of head and body of the European species as about two feet. FISCHER in his synopsis gives it as two and one-third, and CUVIER as two and a half. We have not found any European specimen measuring more than two feet six inches.

It was for a long time supposed, and was so stated by BUFFON, that there was no true species of Badger in America; that author, however, afterwards received a specimen that was said to have come from Labrador, which was named by GMELIN after the country where it was supposed to be common. The name "*Labradoria*" will be very inappropriate should our conjectures prove correct, that it is unknown in that country. BUFFON'S specimen had lost one of its toes; hence he described

it as four-toed. GMELIN, who gave it a scientific name, made "*Palmis tetradactylis*" one of its specific characters.

SCHREBER first considered the American as a distinct species from the European Badger; CUVIER seems to have arrived at a different conclusion; SHAW gave tolerably good figures of both species on the same plate, pointing out their specific differences; and SABINE entered into a minute comparison. RICHARDSON (F. B. A.) added considerably to our knowledge of the history and habits of the American Badger; and our esteemed friend, G. R. WATERHOUSE, Esq., has given descriptions and excellent figures of the skull and teeth, in which the distinctive marks in the dentition of the two species are so clearly pointed out, that nothing farther remains to be added in that department.

We have compared specimens of the *Blaireux* of LEWIS and CLARK found on the plains of Missouri, with those obtained by TOWNSEND near the Columbia, and also with specimens from the plains of the Saskatchewan in the Zoological museum, and found them all belonging to the same species.

Audubon, John James and Bachman, John. 1851. "Meles Labradoria, American Badger [Pl. XLVII, male]." *The quadrupeds of North America* 1, 360–369.

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