


# Badgers North *of the* Border







# How Montana is helping its Canadian neighbors restore a population of this remarkable mammal

Photos and story  
by **John Fraley**  
and **Jim Williams**

**W**hen Nancy Newhouse began working with badgers in British Columbia a decade ago, she had no idea they were in so much trouble. The Canadian wildlife biologist quickly learned that in the entire southern half of the province, only 200 of the squat, short-legged animals remained.

“We’re not sure why,” says Newhouse, who was hired by the British Columbia Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection to head the East Kootenay Badger Project. “But we suspected it was either due to habitat fragmentation or a natural but temporary population decline.”

With the help of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks biologists and a Montana trapper, Newhouse began reestablishing the badger, a member of the weasel (mustelid) family, in portions of British Columbia’s Upper Columbia River Region. She says it’s too early to tell if the relocation effort will bolster the province’s badger population over the long haul. But Newhouse notes that four female badgers translocated from Montana have already produced litters—an essential development in the wildlife project.

“All these females reproducing in their new habitat is exceptional,” she says.

## Good exchange rate

Montana became involved in the project in order to help Canadian biologists prevent badgers from disappearing from the Upper Columbia River Region. It was also an opportunity to return a favor. The state has

received Columbian sharp-tailed grouse, fishers, and grizzly bears from British Columbia. Montana badgers are of the same genetic stock as British Columbia badgers and likely resist the same diseases.

In 2002 and 2003, biologists and professional trappers from both countries captured 16 badgers using soft-jawed foothold traps near the Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge in northwestern Montana. The animals were anesthetized and transported to the office of a local veterinarian, who surgically implanted radio transmitters so biologists could follow their movements. The badgers were then released in southern British Columbia into burrows biologists had dug in open grasslands and burned timber areas—habitat similar to the animals’ Montana living quarters.

Of the 16 badgers released, one was killed by a predator and three were killed by motor vehicles. Though Newhouse calls the deaths “disappointing,” she says that the losses were more than offset by the nine kits raised by the remaining badgers. The

**WHERE AM I?** A badger transplanted from Montana looks out at its new surroundings in southern British Columbia. Biologists with Montana FWP are helping their counterparts in the province to restore the burrowing predator to the Upper Columbia River Region. There, badger numbers have dropped alarmingly low. The new translocation project could help explain why.

biologist fitted five of the young badgers with radio collars, allowing her to track their movements and the location of any that die (to determine the cause of death).

According to Brian Giddings, Montana FWP furbearer coordinator, this is the only badger translocation project ever undertaken in North America. “And so far, the results are encouraging,” he says. “The fact that most of the badgers remained in radio telemetry contact and that the females have successfully raised badger kits is a success by any measure.”

Newhouse and other biologists suspected the badger decline was due either to habitat fragmentation or a population blip. If habitat loss or fragmentation was to blame, then the relocated animals would not survive over the long-term. However, if the lack of badgers was due only to a random decline in a small population, then recovery could be possible. So far, the fact that relocated badgers are still living and reproducing indicates that the Upper Columbia valley remains capable of supporting badgers.

In addition to restoring badgers to southern British Columbia, Newhouse hopes the relocation project increases public interest in the enigmatic species.

“As a carnivore living in river valleys, badgers are actually around people more than many other predators are,” she says. “But because badgers are nocturnal and live underground, most people don’t see them and realize how beautiful they are.”

Though badgers are generally ignored



in the United States, the animals are becoming highly regarded in Canada, where they are listed as federally endangered. Newhouse says the government's national badger recovery effort has created strong public sentiment for badgers.

"Public education and outreach in recent years seem to have increased the badger's visibility and popularity among Canadians," she says.

Newhouse adds that increased public awareness has created an affinity for badgers even among people who have never seen one. She says they just enjoy knowing the animals are living nearby.

"What I've been finding lately in areas I've worked is that people are getting more and more excited to learn about badgers," she says. "For many Canadians, badgers have become one of the family of animals that share their environment." 🐾

## "A Singular Animal"

Lewis and Clark were the first Americans to write about the badger, which they saw on July 30, 1804, near today's Omaha, Nebraska. Private Joseph Fields killed one of the odd-looking animals and brought it to Lewis, who skinned and mounted the creature before sending it to President Jefferson. Lewis wrote, "this is a singular animal not common to any part of the united states." Clark added that the badger's shape and size "is like that of a beaver, his head mouth &c. is like a dogs with short ears, his tail and hair like that of a ground hog...his belly is white and the hair short, a white streak from his nose to his sholders...his legs are short and when he moves just sufficient to raise his body above the ground."

The captains also described the badger's long foreclaws and short, shovel-like hind claws used for digging. They noted accurately that the badger "burrows in the ground and feeds on flesh [prairie dogs], bugs and vegetables."

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### TRANSCONTINENTAL BURROWERS

The Upper Columbia River Region in Canada is the northern limit of the badger's North American range. "Here, they mainly eat Columbian ground squirrels," explains Canadian biologist Nancy Newhouse. "It's too wet farther north to support grasslands where the ground squirrels live." Scientists classify the British Columbia badgers, as well as those in northwestern Montana, as the "jeffersonii" subspecies.

