

Numerous uses for a souped-up badger

Picture this if you will. It's a dark sultry night, about midnight on a lonely country road. A poor badger (*Mustelidae Taxidea* to you science freaks out there) is about to skitter across the road when all of a sudden Billy Joe Jim Bob screams around a corner in his jacked up 4X4 and flattens the critter dead.

Days later, a KU employee finds said badger and decides to keep him. Everyone knows a good badger is hard to find. So the KU employee took the critter home and stuck him in the freezer for later use.

Have I mentioned that up to this point everything about this story — except the name of the driver and the vehicle he was driving — is true?

Well it is.

So anyway, not needing a dead badger at the moment, Tom Swearingen, that's the name of the KU employee with the fondness for roadkill, gave the badger to a grad student named Dan Blumstein. Strange present admittedly, but Blumstein actually needed a badger. If you think about it though, who doesn't need a badger?

Blumstein, a post-doctoral student in systematic ecology, was do-



ing research on the communication habits of marmots. Marmots and badgers are natural enemies, kind of like Donald and Ivana but with fur.

Have I mentioned yet that this research is more than likely funded by federal tax dollars?

Well it might be.

Anyway back to Blumstein and the badger, which, of course, is different than Wally and the Beaver. Blumstein wanted to know if, and I quote, "marmots have different words for different predators." He also wanted to know who put the "bomp" in the Bomp sh-bomp sh-bomp and who put the "ram" in the Ram-a-lam-a-ding-dong? Those question have absolutely nothing to do with his research on the communication skills of marmots, he's just

curious.

For your edification, an example of a marmot is a groundhog. A badger, however, is just a badger.

Now it gets weird.

Blumstein, wasn't happy with a plain badger corpse. Noooo, he had to have a *special* badger corpse with which to do his research. When I was a kid I never even *had* a badger corpse, not that I'm jealous or anything.

Well maybe a little.

Dan Blumstein had to have a badger corpse with *wheels*. Yes, wheels. To do that, he had to stuff the badger and mount it on a remote controlled car. Blumstein said he wanted a wheeled badger so he could drive it around in the woods and scare marmots to see if fear changed their communication habits. Maybe he also wanted to impress some of the other post-doctoral students in his class by being the first one with a remote controlled badger. I don't know. In fact I didn't know that marmots communicated at all. I just can't imagine marmots making conversation. How many times can you talk about the fact that you're an oversized rodent before it gets boring?

Blumstein said in an article of

the Tuesday, April 25, University Daily Kansan, that not only was he going to scare Kansas marmots, he also was going to take his little wheeled buddy to Utah to try to scare marmots there. But Blumstein swore he wouldn't run his fur covered car at full throttle.

"Badgers don't go that fast," he pointed out.

It boggles the mind what people will do in the name of research.

Blumstein didn't tell the intrepid student reporter from the Daily Kansan—whose name is Robert Allen by the way—what his next bit of research will investigate, but if I know Dan as well as I think I do (we've never met), I'll bet it involves wheeled roadkill.

Or at the very least it will be as utterly pointless as studying the communication habits of marmots.

In fact the only thing more pointless than studying the communication habits of marmots is devoting an entire column to the study of the communication habits of marmots and how they relate to a souped up, four-wheel drive, stuffed badger corpse.

But hey, it could have been worse. I could have written about politics.