

Che Goferra



Photo based on an original from Waynespixels:
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/waynespixels/523833556>

For many years at there has been a family of groundhogs who have made their homes in burrows next to the Physics department at Brookhaven National Laboratory. In the last several years, lab management has decided these groundhogs should be moved. Perhaps they felt it was unsafe for groundhogs to live in close proximity to the physics building. There might be an accident, either to human or to animal, that might cause the lab administration embarrassment.

There have been several cases of animal-human interaction at the lab in the past, some of which have caused concern. Once my friend and colleague Rob Pisarski was viscously attacked, with no provocation, by a Canadian

goose. Rob says he was walking along and out of the sky a crazed goose descended upon him – slashing with its pointed beak, trying to disembowel him with its webbed feet. This was, apparently, a “reportable incident” to the Department of Energy. A safety memo went out to all lab employees warning of attacks by geese, and stating that one should try very hard never to provoke them.

When Rob was visiting Germany not too long ago, he had an offer of a job there and we were worried we might lose him. At that time a female goose had laid a nest on the top floor of the physics building. At the end of the corridor where I work there is a window, and the goose would often come to that window and begin chipping at the window with her beak. It seems she wanted in. Happily (and correctly) anticipating Rob’s decision to return to the lab, and in memory of the attack he survived, I named the goose Roberta.

The lab also now has many wild turkeys. During the spring there is the mating ritual that is quite colorful. The lab sends out a safety memo describing in great detail the beauty of the mating ritual, and how it is possible to watch it safely.

I should mention I myself was almost attacked by a young buck deer at one point. When I was walking across an open field at the lab I came upon herd of does near a young male deer. As I approached, the buck lowered his head and began pawing the ground nervously with one hoof. I looked him straight in the eyes, and began moving one foot back and forth on the ground. I could see the buck think about it. . . . He did not want to mess with the being reported to the safety people, it seemed. He finally looked up with an ashamed expression in his eyes, and if he could have talked would have said, “Never mind”.

Well, let me return to the story of this family of groundhogs. During an earlier administration of the physics department, there was a concerted attempt to catch the groundhog and move him. They put a trap up outside his hole for several months. The trap was filled with raw vegetables and looked inviting, but the groundhog never bit.

I think if they had tried a different bait, they might have succeeded: The groundhog’s hole is right next to the entrance to the physics building, and I pass it every day. I was quite surprised to note cigarette butts by his hole. I have been hoping to catch him standing outside his hole some morning

having a smoke, letting me get a picture of him, but I have not been lucky. In any case, I suspect a pack of Marlboros would have been a very effective bait. Surely the administration must have noticed the evidence of his habit, and I'm surprised they haven't tried it. His smoking may actually be the reason why the lab is trying to catch him, since such behavior surely must violate some rule.

In any case, after a while, the humbled department chairman decided to give up the attempt to trap the groundhog. I had assumed that this attempt to capture him would not continue into the next administration. After all, new administrations usually choose to fight battles they can win. However in recent weeks, the struggle has resumed.

Their first efforts coincided in time with the initiation of the remodeling of the entranceway to the department. They tried simply to fill the groundhog's hole in with dirt. I do not think they looked around the building very carefully before doing so, however; there are at least three holes next to the building within in a distance of 100 feet. In any case, by the next morning he had dug through the fill. Next they tried putting a wire mesh over the top of his hole. This time it took him two days to escape. After he had dug his way out, he neatly placed the wire mesh next to the hole.

I think the administration was by this time very upset with the groundhog. He had challenged authority, and done so successfully. Such success is certain to enrage any level of government that with all its power and resources expects to – and usually can -- crush dissenting opinion.

The next time, they brought over a crane with a huge ball. I thought they were going to demolish his home, but no, it proved to be there for another reason. Nevertheless, that was the day that they took the time for an ambitious installation they expected to do the trick: they installed two wire meshes within the hole, and then refilled the hole with dirt. I waited for an entire week, and began to worry that the groundhog would stay buried. But I went away on a trip over the long Memorial Day weekend, and Tuesday when I got back he had dug out again.

To me, this groundhog is a great symbol of freedom: a little guy using his brains and hard work to fight against a much more powerful establishment. I really hope he wins, but the forces of the Federal Government are now

aligned against him. He has humiliated two separate physics department administrations, and no doubt is in the cross hairs of the safety division.

Perhaps, as was done for Mike Creutz's dog, we might print out a fake ID badge for the groundhog, with his own fake ID number. Perhaps we could even sneak into the computer system and register him as a lab employee, certifying that he has taken all required training courses. We could create a web page for him! I think however, that this sort of support of him would only make the situation worse. Mike, after all, was threatened by the FBI with court action. Such a new web page, like Mike's website showing a photo of his dog proudly wearing the badge, would be banned to those using the lab Web access.

In any case, one small voicing of support for the cause of this persecuted animal should be possible. I propose for this valiant groundhog a revolutionary name: Che Goferra. (Goferra sounds like Guevara, and is close to gopher, his cousin with whom he is often confused.) This is of course a name from the left, and most of my colleagues know that my political sympathies are not aligned with those of Che. I tried hard to find some name for a figure of recent times who revolted against authority and stood up for human rights and was of a politically conservative bent but unfortunately, I found I could not remember any.

Larry McLerran
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Note added May 28, 2009:

They have buried Che again! The department chairman, who is an avid and active environmentalist, says that he is not the one who is responsible for trying to make the groundhog move. It is presumably forces more powerful.