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NORTHWEST WILDLIFE PRESERVATION SOCIETY

Animal Name: Fisher

Martes pennanti



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The fisher is a small carnivorous mammal native to North America. The fisher is a forest-dwelling creature whose range covers much of the boreal forest in Canada to the northern fringes of the United States.

Fishers prefer to hunt in full forest. While they are agile climbers, most of their time is spent on the forest floor. Fishers are omnivorous and feed on a wide variety of small animals and occasionally fruits and mushrooms. They show a preference for the snowshoe hare and are one of the few predators able to successfully hunt porcupine. Despite their name, fishers seldom eat fish.

Characteristics

Fishers are a medium-sized mammal, comparable to the size of domestic cat, and the largest species in the marten genus. Their bodies are long, thin, and low to the ground. The sexes have similar physical features but they are sexually dimorphic in size, with the male being much larger than the female. Males are 90–120 cm (35–47 in) in length and weigh 3.5–6 kg (8–13 lb). Females measure 75–95 cm (30–37 in) and weigh 2–2.5 kg (4–6 lb). The largest male fisher ever recorded weighed 9 kg (20 lb).

The fisher's fur changes with the season and differs slightly between sexes. Males have coarser coats than females. In the early winter, the coats are dense and glossy, ranging from 30 mm (1 in) on the chest to 70 mm (3 in) on the back. The colour ranges from deep brown to black, although it appears to be much blacker in the winter when contrasted with white snow. The underside of a fisher is almost completely brown except for randomly placed patches of white or cream-coloured fur. In the summer, the fur colour is more variable and may lighten considerably. Fishers undergo moulting starting in late summer and finishing by November or December.

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Fishers have five toes on each foot with unsheathed, retractable claws. Their feet are disproportionately larger than their legs, making it easier for them to move on top of snow packs. In addition to the toes, there are four central pads on each foot. On the hind paws there are coarse hairs that grow between the pads and the toes, giving them added traction when walking on a variety of surfaces. Fishers have extremely mobile ankle joints, which can rotate their hind paws almost 180 degrees, allowing them to agilely move through tree branches and climb down trees head first.

A circular patch of hair on the central pad of their hind paws marks plantar glands that give off a distinctive odor. Since these patches become enlarged during breeding season, they are likely used to make a scent trail to allow fishers to find each other so that they can mate.

Life Cycle

Reproductive cycle of the fisher lasts almost the entire year. Female fishers give birth to a litter of three or four kits in the spring. They nurse and care for their kits up until late summer, when they are old enough to set out on their own. Females enter estrus shortly after giving birth and leave the den to find a mate. Implantation of the blastocyst is delayed until the following spring when they give birth and the cycle is renewed. The female fisher begins to breed at about one year of age and her reproductive cycle is an almost year-long event. Mating takes place in late March to early April. Blastocyst implantation is then delayed for 10 months until mid-February of the following year when active pregnancy begins. After gestating for about 50 days, the female gives birth to one to four kits. The female then enters estrus 7–10 days later and the breeding cycle begins again.

Females den in hollow trees. Kits are born blind and helpless. They are partially covered with fine hair. Kits begin to crawl after about 3 weeks. After about 7 weeks they open their eyes. They start to climb after 8 weeks. Kits are completely dependent on their mother's milk for the first 8–10 weeks, after which they begin to switch to a solid diet. After 4 months, kits become intolerant of their litter mates, and at 5 months the mother pushes them out on their own. After one year, juveniles will have established their own range.

Habitat

Although fishers are competent tree climbers, they spend most of their time on the forest floor. They prefer dense, continuous forest to other habitats. Fishers have been found in extensive conifer forests typical of the boreal forest but are also common in mixed hardwood and temperate rainforests. Fishers prefer areas with continuous overhead cover with greater than 80% coverage and will avoid areas with less than 50% coverage. Fishers are more likely to be found in old-growth forests. Since female fishers require moderately large trees for denning, forests that have been heavily logged and have extensive second growth appears to be unsuitable for their needs.

Another factor that fishers select for are forest floors that have large amounts of coarse woody debris. In western forests where fire regularly removes understorey debris, fishers show a preference for riparian woodland habitat. Fishers tend to avoid areas with deep snow. Habitat is also affected by snow compaction and moisture content.

The fisher is found only in North America. Historically, it ranged the northern forests of Canada and the United States as well as forests in the Appalachian, Rocky and Pacific Coast Mountains. Today, fishers

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are found only in parts of their historic range. In the United States, they exist in portions of the Appalachian Mountains from New England south to Tennessee; northern Wisconsin, Minnesota and Michigan's Upper Peninsula; northern Idaho and western Montana; and three small West Coast populations in southwestern Oregon, northwestern California, and the southern Sierra Nevada. Reintroductions have led to their reoccupation of former habitats in Idaho, Michigan, Montana, Nova Scotia, Vermont, West Virginia, Maine, Manitoba, Minnesota, New York, Ontario, Tennessee, and Washington.

Behaviour

Fishers prefer large areas of dense mature coniferous or mixed forest and are solitary animals. They are mainly nocturnal, but may be active during the day. They travel many miles along ridges in search of prey, seeking shelter in hollow trees, logs, rock crevices, and dens of other animals.

Fishers eat snowshoe hares, rabbits, rodents and birds, and are one of the few specialized predators of porcupines. Fishers are effective hunters, but are also known to eat insects, nuts, and berries when prey is not available.

Threats

Over-harvesting for pelts and loss of forest habitat due to logging and road building has significantly reduced and fragmented the fisher's range.

Climate change could increase the frequency of fires throughout the fisher's range, removing the older, cavity-bearing trees they need for denning.

Fishers have been trapped since the 18th century. They have been popular with trappers due to the value of their fur. Their fur has been used for scarf and neck pieces. The best pelts are from winter trapping with secondary quality pelts from spring trapping. The lowest-quality furs come from out of season trapping when fishers are molting. They are easily trapped, and the value of their fur was a particular incentive for catching this species. Between 1900 and 1940, fishers were threatened with near-extinction in the southern part of their range due to over-trapping and alterations to their habitat.

Trapping resumed in the U.S. after 1962 once numbers had recovered to sufficient numbers. During the early 1970s, the value of fisher pelts soared, leading to another population crash in 1976. After a couple of years of closed seasons, fisher trapping re-opened in 1979 with a shortened season and restricted bag limits. The population has steadily increased since then, with steadily increasing numbers of trapped animals, despite a much lower pelt value.

What We Can Do To Help

In both the Northern Rockies and their West Coast range, Defenders is working to secure adequate federal protections for fishers and their habitats, actively influencing policies and decisions affecting them — such as trapping in Montana, or logging on private lands in California — and preparing for changes to fisher habitat caused by climate change.

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Due to habitat loss and fragmentation, fishers may venture into urban areas, where they will seek out food. Restricting access to garbage, pet foods, pets and domestic fowl (especially at night) will help avoid negative interactions with these animals. It is also wise to leave fishers alone as they can react aggressively when startled. Fishers are an important part of our native wildlife. By respecting them and taking simple precautions, humans and fishers can live side by side.

Other Interesting Facts

Although not a usual staple for carnivores, a porcupine can easily feed a fisher for two days.

Fishers will follow a porcupine up a tree, overtaking it, and then attack the porcupine from above. The fisher's ability to descend trees head-first, aided by its retractable claws, helps it to approach the porcupine stealthily, attacking the quill-free face.

Fishers belong to the carnivore family called mustelids, and are related to martens, mink, otters and even wolverine.

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