



Searching for Wolverines in the West Cabinets

BY AARON THEISEN

Last winter, nearly 150 volunteers spent 2,000 hours trying to capture images of the elusive furbearer with trail cameras in a remote wildlands area along the Montana-Idaho border.

OF NORTH AMERICA'S many reclusive wildlife species, the wolverine is among the hardest to find. The aggressive carnivore can be as equally ferocious as a wounded grizzly bear and can kill a full-grown elk. Yet its reputation as a take-no-prisoners predator belies the wolverine's secretive side. These animals do not want to be found. And because they are so difficult to locate and study, less is known about wolverines than any other furbearer.

In recent years *Gulo gulo* (Latin for "glutton") has, with reluctance, entered the spotlight, thanks in large part to the success of the Glacier Wolverine Project. In that study, researchers identified nearly two dozen wolverines within Glacier National Park, where the covert carnivores were once thought to be extirpated (locally extinct). Since then, researchers have begun casting a wider net. Because it contains all the habitat components wolverines require, one attractive location for conducting a search is the Cabinet Mountains (known in Montana as the "West Cabinets"), straddling the Idaho-Montana border.

"Partly because it's such a wet environment, and partly because it's so remote, the West Cabinets are rich in both plant and wildlife species," says Jerry Brown, a recently retired Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks wildlife biologist in the Libby area. Brown, who has traveled much of the West Cabinets on foot looking for evidence of wolverines, says the mountains are packed with deep snow in winter, a feature important to the carnivore. "Some parts register more snow than anyplace else in Montana," he says.

The centerpiece of the West Cabinets is

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the Scotchman Peaks proposed wilderness area. Looming over the Cabinet Gorge of the Clark Fork River, the Scotchman Peaks encompass 88,000 acres of rocky summits, subalpine meadows, and steep, brushy drainages. No roads enter the Scotchmans, and only a few footpaths penetrate the periphery—in short, ideal living conditions for creatures that shun humans.

Last winter, in collaboration with volunteers led by the Friends of Scotchman Peaks Wilderness (FSPW) conservation group,



and with funding from Zoo Boise, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) installed and monitored dozens of bait stations with infrared cameras throughout the West Cabinets in the hopes of documenting wolverine presence. The study was part of Idaho's Multi-Species Baseline Initiative, a project to establish population numbers for a wide range of wildlife species.

"In 2000, some folks in Congress got together and decided that we needed an early warning system to determine which species

were in danger of becoming endangered down the road," says Michael Lucid, IDFG regional wildlife biologist. "Congressional leaders created the State Wildlife Grant Program with the intent of allowing every U.S. state and territory to plan and carry out proactive conservation actions to prevent fish and wildlife from becoming endangered."

The wolverine is a species "of greatest conservation need" in Washington and Idaho. But is the species actually in danger of disappearing from those states? No one knows. That's one reason researchers started looking in the West Cabinets during the winter of 2011-12. "Whether you're of the opinion that wolverines need more federal protection or of the opinion that we need to keep the species from being listed under the ESA, you can appreciate that we need more information," says Lucid. "If we have no data, we can't make defensible management decisions."

For decades the West Cabinets have essentially been "a 'no info' zone," says Kelsey Brasseur, FSPW wolverine project coordinator. "Our study was a fact-finding mission to solve that problem."

ADOPT A BAIT STATION

Searching for animals that don't want to be found takes enormous manpower, which IDFG lacked. So Brasseur recruited nearly 150 volunteers, including individuals, families, church groups, and others. The volunteers signed up to "adopt" bait stations, where remote sensor cameras were set up to record visiting wildlife.

From each bait tree, volunteers hung a beaver carcass—obtained from trappers—or part of a road-killed deer. Brass-bristle brushes were installed under the bait to snag hair samples from curious carnivores. Hair samples were later analyzed by a lab to verify species identity. On an adjacent tree, volunteers attached a motion- and heat-activated infrared camera. Anything that was warm

CABINET WILDERNESS PHOTO: STEVEN GNAM; PHOTO ILLUSTRATION AND MAP BY LUKE DURAN/MONTANA OUTDOORS

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and moving triggered the shutter.

The environment of deep snowpack, steep drainages, and avalanche-prone cirques that attracts wolverines unfortunately also inhibits wolverine research. “[*The Wolverine Way* author] Doug Chadwick writes that ‘studying wolverines doesn’t come at anyone’s convenience,’” says Lucid. “In northern Idaho, it can be 20 degrees below zero out or it can be raining—all in the same day. In addition, in winter you’re dealing with really short days. You’ve got less than eight hours to get it done in daylight, so a lot of the time the volunteers were coming back in the dark.”

That didn’t dissuade the Idaho and Montana volunteers. “We’re fortunate to live in an area that’s rugged and is populated with rugged people,” says Brasseur. “Volunteers were really good at finding ways to get back into these areas.” The Idaho Conservation League and staff of Selkirk Outdoor Leadership and Education helped recruit and train volunteers. Some cross-country skied up to seven hours into the backcountry to reach the most remote bait stations, Brasseur adds. Then they had to come out again, often using headlamps.

At the end of the winter season, volunteers sorted through nearly 100,000 images

captured by the 36 camera stations. “Each time we checked a camera’s file, we sort of held our breath, wondering what we’d see,” says Brasseur.

Researchers and volunteers were disappointed not to find a single wolverine image. However, the cameras still provided the most complete picture of Scotchman Peaks carnivores to date—including a few surprises. Fishers—until recently thought to be nearly extirpated from their range in northwestern Montana—appear to have established a stronghold in the West Cabinets. The study documented fishers visiting 23 bait stations over the winter. Researchers were also surprised by the inordinate number of northern flying squirrels in the study

area. One picture shows seven flying squirrels simultaneously feasting on a single beaver bait. In addition, the cameras captured pine martens at 41 stations. Other species included ermine: 20 stations; bobcat: 7; coyote: 5; wolf: 4; and red fox: 1.

“With this evidence of carnivore diversity, you go a long way toward establishing with the public that the Scotchman Peaks is truly a special place,” says Brown.

As for the lack of wolverine images, Lucid says that, for now, it appears the area is not home to the large mustelid. “You can never say for sure a species is absent. But the bait station technique is an excellent way to detect wolverines. Not detecting even one with the high sampling intensity we applied to the West Cabinets suggests no resident and reproductive wolverines are in that area.”

Lucid notes that IDFG biologists and others have found wolverine tracks in the West Cabinets, “so we know that wolverines are at least traveling through the area.” Also, wolverines have been recorded by IDFG cameras in the Selkirk Mountains to the north and by a U.S. Forest Service camera in the adjacent Cabinet Mountains Wilderness to the east.

It could just be a matter of time before the elusive carnivores once again call the Scotchman Peaks home. 🐾

LEARN MORE

Idaho Multi-Species Baseline Initiative
<https://fishandgame.idaho.gov/content/baseline>

Wolverines in Montana:
fwp.mt.gov/mtoutdoors/HTML/articles/portraits/wolverine.htm

Scotchman Peaks:
scotchmanpeaks.org



WHERE'S THE WOLVERINE? Motion-triggered camera stations set up in remote areas of the West Cabinets turned up, from left to right, ermine, fisher, and pine marten, among other carnivores. Though researchers and volunteers found no evidence of wolverines, that doesn't mean the animals aren't there. Wolverine tracks have been spotted, and the reclusive mustelids have been photographed in mountains to the north and east.