

Montana Outdoors PORTRAIT

Marten

(*Martes Americana*)

By John Fraley



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Also known as the pine marten or American sable, the marten is a house cat-sized member of the weasel family. To Alaska's Koyukon people, the marten is known as *sooga*, or "brother of the wolverine," to which the marten is closely related. The slender but powerful marten moves phenomenally fast in trees, often catching red squirrels after high-speed chases. The nimble predator is common in northern North America, ranging from Alaska and throughout Canada to the Pacific Northwest, Intermountain West, northern Great Lake states, and New England. Similar marten subspecies live in northern Europe and Russia.

Appearance

An adult marten is roughly 20 to 30 inches long and weighs from 1½ to 3 pounds. Males are about one-third larger than females. The furbearer is known for its sharply pointed face, erect ears, and bushy tail. Color varies, but the marten's fine, dense fur is usually light brown on the body and dark brown to black on the tail and legs. A bright orange or yellow patch highlights the throat and breast.



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Sound

Marten are shy, and sightings are not common, but if you do spot one it will likely hold its ground. An aggressive predator, the marten makes growling, huffing, and scolding noises when approached by humans. Having spent much time in northwestern Montana forests, I've been fortunate to see many marten over the years. Once I was actually scolded by a marten that seemed to consider the elk quarters I was packing out to be his property.

Food

Marten eat mostly voles and mice—which in winter they capture in snow tunnels—as well as squirrels and snowshoe hares. They also scavenge on deer and elk carcasses during winter and spring. In summer, this voracious predator actually dines on berries for part of its diet.

Reproduction

Marten breed in summer. Courtship can last 15 days, during which the pair wrestles while growling, screaming, and "chuckling" (a sound that biologists consider a mating call). The mating process is unique and violent. The male grabs the female's neck with his teeth and drags her around for 30 minutes or more before copulation, which lasts another hour. The fertilized eggs in the female become inactive through the winter before attaching to the wall of the uterus, where they then develop into a fetus

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for two months before birth. This is known as delayed implantation. Young (usually three) are born in April, reach adult size by late summer, and reach sexual maturity at about one and a half years.

Habitat

Marten use a variety of forest types. Most are found in denser spruce and fir forests, where downed timber and heavy ground cover support good numbers of voles and mice. Marten use squirrel dens in trees, woodpecker holes, or underground dens.

Status

Marten are on a roll in Montana. They are widely distributed throughout the western part of the state east to the Crazy Mountains, which was their historic distribution. According to Brian Giddings, FWP furbearer coordinator, marten will probably do even better in the future because trees growing after timber harvest in the 1950s and 1960s are now large enough to provide suitable habitat.

Trapping

Giddings says that this popular furbearer is the key species in western Montana mountain trapping and has been attracting more interest in recent years. Trappers take roughly 1,000 marten each year. Pelts are valuable, bringing about \$25 to \$40 on the fur market. Marten, also known as sable, is one of the finest furs. In the Koyukon culture, the light, warm marten hat is considered the ultimate symbol of good times. The creator of the world, they believe, wore a marten hat. ■