

Wolverine Watcher

An 83-year-old volunteer is changing what we know about the state's rarest large carnivores.

By Sierra Cistone

Don Heffington straps a few dozen pounds of frozen deer meat to the back of his snowmobile, then starts up the engine. On this cold April morning, the snow is too deep to drive his truck any farther into the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest's Pintler Mountains, 60 miles west of Butte. Now, on the snowmobile, he starts a 10-mile journey even deeper into the backcountry.

Along the way, Heffington stops to point out a wolverine's old, faint tracks. It's a reminder that even in these remote and snow-covered mountains, a few species are able to survive and even thrive. Among them are the two rarely seen carnivores—wolverines and Canada lynx—that provide the reason for today's snowmobile outing.

The 83-year-old Butte resident has been

volunteering for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks for seven years, spending most winter weekends monitoring the elusive carnivores. Deer meat attracts them to remote camera traps triggered by movement. By examining the digital photos over the years, Heffington has put together an intimate story of one population of wolverines and documented the first and only known Canada lynx in this national forest.

PERFECTING A SYSTEM

Despite his vast knowledge of wolverines, Heffington is not a wildlife biologist. During the week, he manages rental properties in the Butte area and refuses to consider himself retired. But on the weekends, he heads into the mountains.

Working in cooperation with FWP, he

spends entire days in the field—snowmobiling, snowshoeing, and setting up bait stations. Over the years, he has perfected a unique system of camera trapping that allows him to identify individual wolverines. The system involves using downed timber found on site to build an elaborate frame that acts as a ladder for wolverines to reach bait that's hung overhead. The frame is slightly wider than an average wolverine and is placed so that as an animal climbs, it must splay its legs, revealing its underside to the cameras.

Through a genetic quirk that may be specific to this population, wolverines in the northern range of the Pintlers have especially ornate white markings on their chest, belly, and neck. Heffington compares the markings, unique to each individual wolverine, to a fingerprint. The underside can also

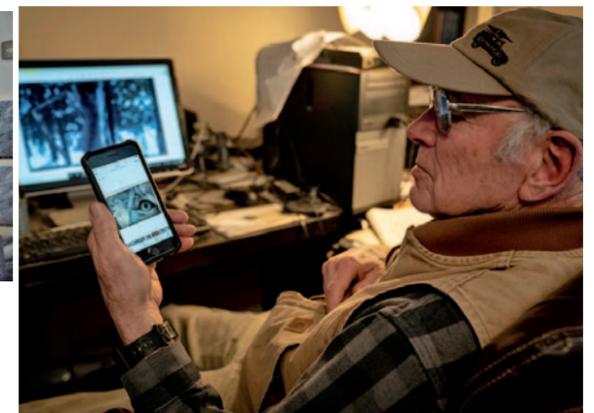
FOREST CARNIVORE SERVICE Don Heffington looks for a trail camera he previously installed on a tree in the Pintler Mountains. The Butte resident has spent the past seven years as a volunteer for FWP, setting cameras out across the range to collect photos of wolverines and Canada lynx for the agency.

reveal the animal's sex and, if female, whether it is lactating. Knowing the sex, reproductive status, and who's who in the population has allowed Heffington to construct a northern Pintlers wolverine family tree.

The genealogy starts with a matriarch that Heffington caught on camera in 2018. Her markings resemble two bite marks in her white chest fur, so Heffington named her Two Bit. Photographs showing Two Bit's exposed teats document her raising a litter of kits every year since. Most of the young wolverines are never caught on camera, but one kit has been a regular at the trail cameras. Heffington named her Tube-



MONEY SHOTS Above and right: Heffington looks at images of individual wolverines taken from his trail cameras. On his phone is a shot of a Canada lynx, the first confirmed sighting in the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest.



sock because of her white feet, and she went on to raise at least two litters of her own. Though wolverines are thought to be territorial and solitary, Two Bit and Tubesock have

overlapping territories.

Heffington talks about each individual wolverine like he knows them personally, and his refrigerator is adorned with photos



IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL COME Counterclockwise from top: Heffington hauls 50-plus pounds of gear into the camera sites. Included is a roadkill deer haunch he scavenged from a local highway then rigged with wire for hanging, a small saw for cutting branches to construct the frame that forest carnivores must climb to reach the meat, a portable drill for assembling the structure, trail cameras to record the visits, and rope to hoist the bait.



ALL PHOTOS: SIERRA CISTONE, EXCEPT RIGHT: KALON BAUGHN

from his camera traps. “I’ve never seen a wolverine in the wild,” he says. “But taking these pictures all these years, you feel kind of a kinship to each one.”

“HERE’S SOMEONE REALLY INTERESTED”

Heffington was inspired to monitor rare forest carnivores after seeing a call for volunteers in the local newspaper in 2016. That first year, he helped with a multi-state effort to estimate where and how many wolverines were in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, and Washington. At the time, Heffington had never before been on a snowmobile and knew little about Montana’s rare forest carnivores. But the experience was addictive, and he offered to continue monitoring the same area the following year.

Vanna Boccadori, FWP’s Butte-area wildlife biologist, remembers Heffington walking into her office that first year. “It didn’t take long to realize that here’s someone who’s really interested, beyond just reading books, someone who wants to learn more about this particular species,” she says.

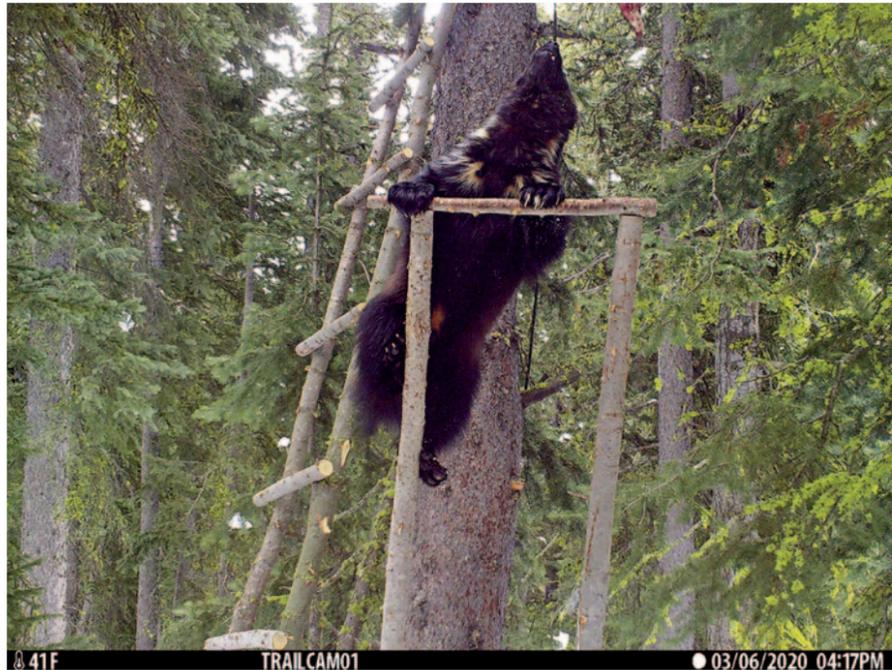
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Boccadori has remained Heffington’s main FWP contact the past seven years, and the two are working on a five-year report that will publish Heffington’s findings. As far as Boccadori and Heffington know, being able to document three matrilineal generations of wolverines using just camera traps has never been done before.

One major challenge in documenting the relatively scarce wolverines is that individuals’ home ranges span several hundred square miles. Another is that these largest members of the weasel family live in some of Montana’s most rugged and remote mountains.

“Having a volunteer like Don, who is so dedicated and has become so knowledgeable, is critical to our understanding of wolverines in this part of the state,” Boccadori says. She notes that FWP has made wolverine monitoring a major priority as global warming and human development threaten the furbearers’ habitats.

Wolverines aren’t the only animals benefiting from Heffington’s dedication afield. In 2018, one of his remote cameras took a picture of a Canada lynx, a federally threatened species. At the time, lynx weren’t known to live in the Beaverhead-Deerlodge



UNDERCOAT “FINGERPRINT” A photo from one of Heffington’s trail cameras shows how a wolverine exposes its underside, showing the unique white markings that allow him to identify individual animals, as it climbs his log structures to retrieve the bait.



National Forest, and the confirmed sighting required the forest's staff to tighten restrictions on logging and other activities that could imperil the big cat's habitat. By knowing where at-risk species live, land managers can find ways for some development to continue while protecting critical habitat.

Neil Anderson, FWP regional wildlife manager in Kalispell, says the agency depends on many volunteers throughout the state who help monitor wildlife, assist at hunter check stations, and help with public education. "The state is just too big for us to manage wildlife on our own," he says. "We need the public's help, and then when someone like Don comes along, we get far more than we ever hoped for."

As for Heffington, right now in late fall 2023 he's setting up his cameras—though without bait so that bears don't bother them. After bears hibernate for the winter, he'll return with venison he hopes will entice any wandering wolverines to come investigate.

Heffington estimates he has put in thousands of hours monitoring wolverines, and he has no plans to stop any time soon. "It's something I'd like to see more people doing," he says of his wildlife conservation volunteer work. "It's enjoyable, it keeps you active, and it's something worthwhile." 🐾

HARD TO FIND Wolverines, like these in the Lewis and Clark–Helena National Forest, are rare, solitary forest carnivores difficult for biologists to count. Heffington's ingenious method of identifying individuals is helping FWP biologists better understand how the Pintler Range population is faring.



PHOTOS: KALON BAUGHN