

Fisher

Pekania pennanti

By Tom Dickson

Before we die, the animal that many of my friends and I hope to see is the wolverine—that fierce, indomitable symbol of the wildest of wild places. For me, a close second is its cousin, the fisher.

I've been fascinated by fishers since I was a kid. I remember feeling the fur of a "Russian sable" coat in a fancy department store. I later learned that sables are a northern Eurasian furbearer closely related to the American marten and fisher. As a boy I also heard a recording of a fisher howling in northern Minnesota. It sounded like a person being murdered. To me, fishers embody both my lifelong fascination with luxury and fear of the dark, deep forest.

Identification

Fishers are mid-sized members of the weasel, or mustelid, family. Weighing from 5 to 10 pounds, they are about four times heavier than martens but markedly smaller than wolverines (17 to 27 pounds), the largest mustelid.

Fishers have dark eyes, rounded ears, and a pronounced muzzle. The fisher is stockier than the marten but has a similarly long body, short legs, and long (though thicker) tail. The coat is blackish brown to black, compared to the marten's usual golden-brown coat.

Common name

Fishers do not eat fish. The name comes from the Old Dutch *fisse* or French *fichet*, names for the European polecat, a similar-looking mustelid. For years, fishers were commonly called "fisher cats," likely because of their cat-like scream, partially retractable claws, and ability to climb trees. But fishers are not related to the felids.

Distribution

Before European settlement, fishers ranged across the Canadian provinces and down into the United States along the West Coast,

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Scientific name

Pekania is derived from the Canadian French *pékan*, a word of Algonquian origin for the fisher. *Pennanti* is named for the British naturalist Thomas Pennant, author of the first zoological text that described North American animals.

through the intermountain Northern Rockies, and from northern Minnesota east and south through Appalachia. Unregulated trapping and forest clear-cutting vastly reduced numbers in the United States. Montana translocated fishers to the state's western mountains several times in the latter half of the 20th century. Today the species is found in Montana forests west of the Continental Divide, especially in the Cabinet Mountains, where the largest numbers were reintroduced.

Reproduction

Fishers mate in late March to early April, but the young aren't born until almost a year later. As is the case with most mustelids, implantation of the fertilized eggs in the uterus is delayed. In the female fisher, the embryos remain dormant for more than nine months before implanting in the uterus to complete development. In March, the female gives birth to a litter of two to three kits in the cavity of a large tree or log, where she rears them for seven to eight weeks.

Food

Fishers feed with little discrimination. They eat small mammals—from deer mice to snowshoe hares—birds, deer carrion, and berries. According to Kerry Foresman, author of *Mammals of Montana*, they are the only predator other than the mountain lion that regularly kills porcupines. A fisher dances circles around its prickly prey and then attacks from the front, striking repeatedly at the porcupine's quill-less head until it dies or can be flipped onto its back, exposing the vulnerable neck and belly.

Management and status

FWP is trying to determine which areas of Montana can and cannot support fishers over the long term. Fishers are creatures of dense northern conifer forests with enough precipitation and the right soil conditions to grow large-diameter trees such as western red cedar that often hollow out. Fishers also do better in areas with moist, crusted snow systems than places with deep, dry powder.

Fisher harvest is strictly managed. In Montana, trapping is allowed only in prescribed areas for a few months in winter, with a total statewide sustainable harvest quota of just six fishers. After the quota is reached, or when a single female is trapped, FWP closes the entire season. In 2011, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service determined that the fisher in the Northern Rockies did not warrant listing under the Endangered Species Act. 🐾