

THE PACIFIC FISHER

AN ELUSIVE FOREST CARNIVORE

Sequoia National Forest



Order: **CARNIVORA**
Family: **MUSTELIDAE**
Genus: *Martes*
Species: *pennanti*



GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Fishers have long, slender bodies with muscular, short legs similar to their cousins- weasel, mink, marten, and otter. Their thick, grayish-brown to brownish-black glossy fur tends to be darker on females. White-tipped hairs on the older fisher give a grizzled appearance. This forest carnivore has strong claws for climbing and a long, bushy, black, tapered tail. They also have five toes on each foot and semi-retractable claws which contribute to their ability to climb trees. Males average 4-12 pounds, about twice the size of females.

GEOGRAPHIC RANGE & DISTRIBUTION

Fishers are found from southeastern Alaska and British Columbia east to northern Minnesota, upstate New York, northern New England, and eastern Canada and south to the California Sierra Nevada Mountains and the Rocky Mountains in Wyoming.

Recent surveys indicate that fisher are absent from their former range for a distance of almost 240 miles in the central and northern Sierra, from Yosemite National Park northward. This gap in distribution of

effectively isolating the existing southern Sierra Nevada population in the Sequoia National Forest and a portion of the Sierra National Forest, from the remainder of the fisher's range in California, Oregon, and Washington.

On the West Coast, only three small, isolated fisher populations remain, including native populations in northern California and the southern Sierra Nevada may be reintroduced population in the southern Oregon Cascades. The average home range size for fishers in California (Southern Sierra) is 9,800 acres-males & 6,200 acres-females.

DIET/FOOD HABITS

Fishers are considered to be quite carnivorous, preying on squirrels, carrion, mice, shrews, voles, birds, and fruits. In the northern portion of their range they are famous for their ability to successfully hunt and kill porcupines. One of the very few other animals to prey on porcupines is a close cousin of the fisher, the wolverine. Throughout their range fishers consume a diversity of prey species. This is especially evident in the southern Sierra Nevada,



where studies have shown that they will switch prey in response to availability. In the southern Sierra their diets are so diverse they even prey on lizards (especially alligator lizards) and insects.

Fishers compete for food with foxes, martens, bobcats, weasels, and coyotes. Contrary to its name, the fisher does not eat fish. American settlers may have confused the fisher with the European polecat, which is called the fitch ferret, fichet or fitch, and then mistakenly translated it as “fisher.”

REPRODUCTION

Fishers reach sexual maturity by the age of one. The majority of mating takes place during the months of March and April, but it is nearly a year before the young are born. This is due to delayed implantation of the fertilized egg. The fishers litter size ranges from one to five and averages three. A litter is born every year, in a den that can be anything from a hollow tree or log to a rock crevice. The young are able to travel with the mother after three months and are usually on their own by six months of age.

BEHAVIOR

Fishers are active day and night throughout the year. They are agile and speedy tree climbers. They are also quite solitary; there is little evidence that they ever travel together, except possibly during the mating season. There has been some observed aggression between males, which supports the notion that they are solitary.

Communication between fishers occurs through scent marking. Fishers use “resting sites,” such as logs, hollow trees, stumps, holes in the ground, brush piles and nests of branches, during all times of the year. Ground burrows are most commonly used in

the winter, and tree nests are used all year, but mainly in the spring and fall.

HABITAT

Fishers prefer a continuous, unfragmented forest; they are found in mature conifer and mixed hardwood conifer forests. They like a high canopy closure and a continuous overhead cover. They also prefer habitats with many hollow trees and downed logs for dens and resting sites.

STATUS & TRENDS & CURRENT MANAGEMENT

Fisher populations are presently at low numbers, or absent throughout most of their historic range in Montana, Idaho, Washington, Oregon, and California. In recent decades, a scarcity of sightings in Washington, Oregon, and the northern Sierra Nevada may indicate fisher extirpation from much of this area. The Sierra Nevada and northwestern California populations may be the only naturally-occurring, known breeding population of fishers in the Pacific region from southern British Columbia to California.

The United States Fish and Wildlife (USFWS) was petitioned to list the fisher under the Endangered Species Act in 1990 and 1994. In both cases, the USFWS reported that there was insufficient information to make a determination. A third petition was submitted to USFWS on November 27, 2000. They are currently a state and federal species of concern.

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