



A Shy, Solitary Night-Stalker

Fisher

Martes pennanti

If you happen to see a fisher in the wild, we hope you have your camera ready because a fisher sighting is a truly rare experience.

This furry little carnivore, one of the larger members of the weasel family, is a shy, solitary night-stalker. Fishers are very effective hunters, taking many species of small mammals as their prey. In fact the fisher is the only predator that routinely hunts and kills porcupines.

It is this deserved reputation as a tenacious hunter that sometimes gets fishers into trouble with humans. In areas where their habitat brings them close to urban populations or rural residences, it has been suggested that fishers hunt and kill domestic cats, which is an understandable concern for pet owners.

Range

Fishers are found only in North America, in a broad band across the continent that includes much of Canada

from Nova Scotia to British Columbia, and in parts of the northeastern, northwestern and western U.S. (see map on next page).



Fishers are truly beautiful animals with dark fur covering a slender body, short legs and a long bushy tail.

By the early 1900s the removal of forests through logging, fire and settlement had reduced fisher numbers over large areas of its historic range. Protective legislation, habitat improvements and reintroduction programs have restored fisher populations in many areas. Today, Ontario's fisher population is healthy.

Although Ontario has been involved in fisher reintroduction programs in the past, the growth in fisher range in the province in recent decades has occurred through natural dispersal.

Habitat

Fishers typically live in heavily forested softwood and mixed stands with lots of overhead cover. They do not like large open areas, such as clear-cuts. However, they will hunt for small rodents in fields and meadows if there is protective forest cover nearby.

Optimal conditions for fishers are forest tracts of 100 ha or more, interconnected with other large areas of suitable habitat spread across their home range.

Fishers vary their habitat use based on the season. In the winter they are more likely to stay in an old coniferous forest with plenty of canopy cover, which decreases the amount of snow that falls on the forest. In the summer fishers use many different habitats and are commonly found in hardwood stands. Brush piles and other forest debris provide both hunting and hiding opportunities.

Although they do not migrate seasonally, fishers often travel extensively within their habitat. One study has shown a fisher travelling over 90 km in three days.

Physical Characteristics

Fishers are truly beautiful animals, with dark fur covering a slender body, short legs and a long bushy tail.

Adult males typically weigh between 4.5 and 6.5 kg. Some very large males can weigh up to 8 kg. Adult females weigh 2.5 to 3.5 kg.



Daniel J. Cox ©

The fisher is a carnivore, a nocturnal hunter, and an opportunistic feeder with a strong preference for snowshoe hare.

Fishers are typically black on the tail, around the back end and on the hind legs. Tricoloured guard hairs cover the back and head of the animal, giving it a golden brown look. Sometimes the underbelly of the fisher can have white patches of uneven size and shape. New fur growth begins in September or October and is usually complete by late November.

The prime fur (new winter fur) of the fisher has stiff, shiny guard hairs, is very full, and is present any time between late November and the end of January. When the fur is past its prime stage in late January it becomes thinner, and changes to a lighter more reddish colour. During the moulting summer season fisher fur becomes much thinner and lighter in colour. Juvenile fishers are generally darker than the adults. Their fur begins to change and reach adult primeness at about four months of age.

The paws of the fisher are much like a cat's with black, leathery pads and five sharp semi-retractable claws. During the winter season the feet become heavily furred. Although females are physically smaller

than males, it is difficult to distinguish between the sexes based on their tracks.

Food Sources

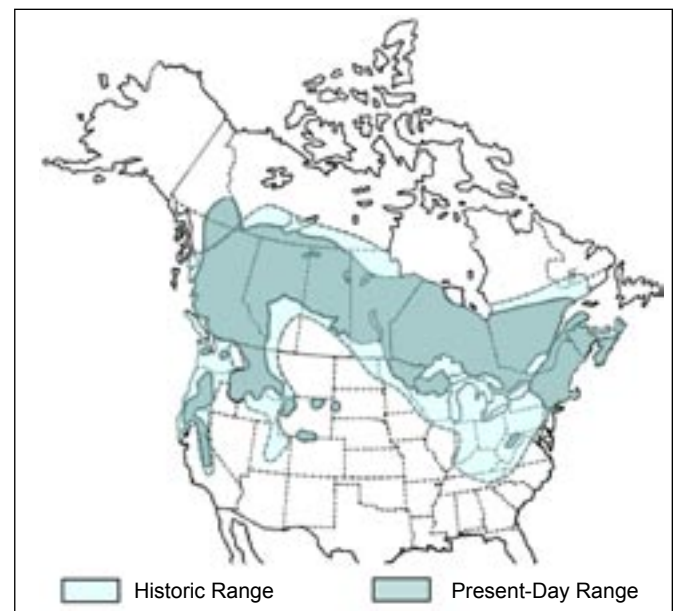
Contrary to what its name might suggest, fish do not make up a significant proportion of a fisher's diet. The name "fisher" may have come from early settlers who confused the animal with the European polecat (another member of the weasel family) commonly called a fichtet or fitche.

The fisher is a carnivore, a nocturnal hunter, and an opportunistic feeder, with a strong preference for snowshoe hare. Some studies suggest that fishers choose to live in areas where snowshoe hare are abundant. Some long-term research has indicated a link between population density cycles in snowshoe hare and fishers.

Small mammals (snowshoe hare, mice, squirrels, shrews and voles) typically make up 80 percent of a fisher's diet. They will also feed on birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish, insects, eggs, fruits, nuts and berries. Fruit may comprise as much as 30 percent of their diet in the summer.

As opportunists, fishers will also feed on carrion, including the entrails of deer left behind by hunters.

The fisher's reputation as a tenacious predator comes at least partly from the fact that it is the only animal that regularly preys on porcupines.



Fishers are found only in North America, in a broad band across the continent.

The fisher kills porcupines with repeated bites to the face, then feeds through the unprotected underbelly. In areas where fisher re-introduction programs have been successful, subsequent declines in porcupine populations have been observed.

The fisher does not have any natural predators but bobcats, competing for hunting territory, will sometimes kill young and even adult fishers.

Behaviour

Fishers are solitary creatures that are most active in the late evening and very early morning.

In habitat where prey are relatively abundant, fishers typically hunt an area intensively in a zigzag pattern, with frequent changes in direction. Using this method a fisher may hunt an area up to 30 km in diameter over a five to ten day period.

When prey are less abundant, fishers have been observed travelling long distances in one direction, stopping occasionally to investigate potential food sites.

Fishers kill most prey with a neck bite and may use their whole body to wrap around and hold the animal down.

They can also swim and are very good tree climbers. In fact, fishers have the ability to rotate their hind legs and climb down a tree headfirst like a squirrel. But they appear to do most of their hunting on the ground.

Scent glands are used to mark territory. Male fishers are very territorial and protective against other males. And females are very territorial and protective against other females. Female and male home ranges can overlap.

Female fishers typically have a home range of about 15 km². The male's typical home range is significantly larger at 38 km². The female and male home ranges change with the seasons, shrinking in mid-winter and growing in April, May and June.

Reproduction

Fishers build their dens in hollow trees, rock crevices, slash piles, rock falls, abandoned beaver lodges, and under snow. The choice of a den is directly related to the type of forest. In coniferous forests, fishers often build tree-nests, while in hardwood stands hollowed out tree cavities seem to be preferred.

Both male and female fishers reach sexual maturity at 12 months of age. Most female fishers then produce their first litter at 24 months.

The breeding season usually begins in late March.

Females begin to seek a male partner six to eight days after bearing their young and remain in heat for two or three days. If the female does not conceive during the first mating, she may engage in a second round of mating about 14 days later.



Daniel J. Cox ©

The fisher has a reputation as a tenacious predator. It is the only animal that regularly preys on porcupines.

During the breeding period a female will travel her home range to find a male. The female is thought to be the dominant individual during the breeding period. Males and females may stay together for several days during the mating period.

After mating, female fishers experience something called delayed implantation. The fertilized egg lies dormant for nearly 11 months before it implants in the uterus and starts to develop. The gestation period lasts for just over a month, usually beginning near the end of February.

The young are born blind, helpless and almost completely hairless, weighing about 4 grams. The males do not play a role in caring for the young.

Dens in cavity trees, with small entrance holes, provide the most effective protection for the young fishers during the critical first eight to ten weeks of life.

Kits open their eyes at about seven weeks and then become mobile at about eight weeks, when they are typically moved into a larger den on or below the ground. They begin taking solid food at approximately nine weeks of age, but continue to suckle until they are four months old. At this time they also begin to hunt for themselves. By five months of age the kits are nearly the same length as the adults. The young stay with their mothers until late summer or early fall.

Fisher Management

Like all forest-dwelling wildlife species, fishers play an important role in Ontario's forest ecosystems. Ensuring the health of fisher populations contributes to our efforts to protect and sustain the overall ecological health of our forests.

Fishers are also an important species for the trapping and fur industry. One quarter of the fisher harvest in North America takes place in Ontario.

Fashion dictates the demand for fisher fur on the market. In 2003 fisher fur sold for an average of \$32 to \$37 per pelt, but the value can vary based on the quality of the pelt and overall demand. During the early 1980s fisher pelts were selling for up to \$400. Fisher fur is used in the clothing industry, usually as trim on coats and other garments.

Trappers harvest fishers based on quotas set by the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources. Fisher harvest quotas are established using the past year's harvest, age and sex ratio of previous harvests, and the size of the area to be harvested. Local trappers work closely with MNR in monitoring and ensuring the sustainability of the population.

Ontario is a world-leader in the humane trapping of fur-bearers. All traps used in harvesting fishers in Ontario are subject to testing by the Fur Institute of Canada and certification by the Ministry of Natural Resources.

Questions and Answers

Question:

Do fishers really kill domestic cats and what can I do about it?

Answer:

As opportunistic feeders, fishers may occasionally kill domestic cats. As urban and rural populations move closer to forested areas, the potential for interactions with fishers and other wild animals increases. People who live close to forested areas should not let their pets run free.

Question:

What do I do if I see a fisher?

Answer:

Get a camera. A fisher is a solitary animal and will usually avoid humans, making fisher sightings a rare occurrence.

Question:

What do I do if I'm concerned about a fisher visiting my property?

Answer:

Although fishers are not normally attracted by garbage, they will investigate anything with a scent of meat. Keep your property clean and your pets contained, and fishers will look elsewhere for food.

Acknowledgements

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