

Fisher

Martes pennanti



Other common names

Fisher cat, pole cat

Introduction

Fishers are one of only a few predators known to successfully feed on porcupines on a regular basis. They are also known as fisher cats, but this name is misleading. Fishers are not cats, they are actually part of the weasel family. They also do not consume much fish in their diet, nor do they spend much time in the water. The name may have come from its catlike movements. It may also have been from the French word for polecat pelt, *fichet*, which is how colonial fur-trappers from France often labeled the pelts they got from this animal. The fisher remains an important part of the fur trade to this day.

Physical Description and Anatomy

Fishers have a long, slender body with short, muscular legs and a long, bushy tail. They have a short muzzle and small, rounded ears. Their long, thick, glossy fur is greyish-brown to almost black. Males often have a ruff of multicolored guard hairs around the neck and shoulders. There is a significant difference in size between sexes. Males weigh 7 – 13 lbs (3.2 – 5.9 kg) and are 35 – 47 inches (88.9 – 119.4 cm) long, while females weigh 3 – 7 lbs (1.4 – 3.2 kg) and are 30 – 37 inches (76.2 – 94.0 cm) long. Both sexes have large feet with strong, semi-retractable claws that enable them to climb trees and grasp prey. They also have the ability to spread their toes, giving them better support on soft snow. Their hind feet are capable of rotating nearly 180°,

which allows them to descend from trees headfirst. Males and females both have anal scent glands that they use to mark their territory and attract mates.

Identifying features (tracks, scat, calls)



Fisher pelt.



Fisher skull.



Fisher tracks.

Front (left image): 2 1/8 – 3 7/8 inches long by 2 1/8 – 3 1/4 inches wide

Hind (right image): 2 1/8 – 3 inches long by 2 – 3 inches wide

Fishers may be confused with martens, but fishers are larger and their fur is darker, and martens are not found on the Rensselaer Plateau. Fisher tracks may be confused with otters, but attention to detail, behavior, and the surrounding environment aid identification. Fishers have dense fur on the sole that is visible in high quality tracks, while fur on the soles of otters' feet is sparse. Also, fishers are usually solitary, while otters are often found in pairs or groups. A single set of tracks may belong to a fisher, but they have been seen in pairs during mating season. Finally, look at the behavior indicated by the pattern of tracks. Otters frequently slide in mud and snow. Fishers, on the other hand, will usually be seen approaching the base of many trees, searching for prey items.

Another easily identifiable sign that a fisher is in the area is the presence of “beat up” saplings and bushes. Fishers will roll on, urinate on, bite, and generally mangle the same shrub over and over again to mark its territory. They will also use their scat and scent glands to mark over the trails of other species.



A hemlock sapling that has been “beat up” by a fisher.

Habitat

Fishers are found in mature and mixed forests, especially near wetlands, which are a good source of prey animals. They prefer a closed canopy, avoiding clearings and logged areas.

Behavior and Diet

Fishers are omnivores and dietary generalists, eating anything suitable they come across.

Often this includes hunting, and they will take small to medium mammals, sometimes even larger than themselves. With a larger kill, they will cache the prey to feed on it over time, consuming everything but the stomach and intestines. Their known prey items include rabbits, squirrels, mice, shrews, and birds, as well as carrion. They will also follow the trails of other predators, like fox, and dig up their cache. When prey is scarce, fishers will feed on hard and soft mast like beechnuts, acorns, apples, and berries.

One particular prey item they are known for targeting is porcupines. Fishers are one of the few predators that are regularly successful at hunting porcupines. One method they use is targeting an individual on a tree branch, and scaring it onto a branch too weak to hold its weight, causing it to fall to the ground and possibly stun or injure itself. A fisher will also chase down a porcupine in the open, running circles around it and slashing at its unprotected face. The porcupine weakens over time until it stops defending itself, at which point the fisher will flip it onto its back to attack it from the soft belly.

Fishers are generally solitary, except during mating season, defending their territory from other fishers. They may be active at any time of the day or night, and travel up to 100 miles in search for food. They make their dens in natural cavities in trees and hollow logs, or under rocky



Assorted fisher scat.

outcrops and brush piles. They may also use underground burrows. During birthing season, they usually den in a hollow tree well above the ground to protect their offspring from predators. There are no natural predators of adult fishers, but they do compete with other carnivores for food, and those same carnivores may prey upon fisher kits.

Human Interactions

Fishers are occasionally seen as a nuisance species, as they may take domestic fowl like chickens, as well as domestic cats. Humans are the only species that targets fishers in any great number. Fisher pelts were an important part of the fur trade during colonial times, and remain so to this day. Over-trapping combined with habitat fragmentation and reduction from logging reduced their numbers, but careful management has stabilized their population.

Reproduction

Female fishers have the unusual ability of delaying implantation of fertilized embryos. This allows them to mate when they find a suitable individual, but delay development of the young until the appropriate time of year. Females give birth to litters of 2-3 kits in March or April, and may mate again as soon as 10 days later. The mother spends most of her time with the kits at first, but starts weaning them by week 8-10. The young disperse in autumn, at 5 months of age, when interfamilial aggression begins. Both males and females reach sexual maturity in their first year, but because of delayed implantation females may not produce their first litter until their second year. It is estimated they can live at least 10 years.

Fun Facts

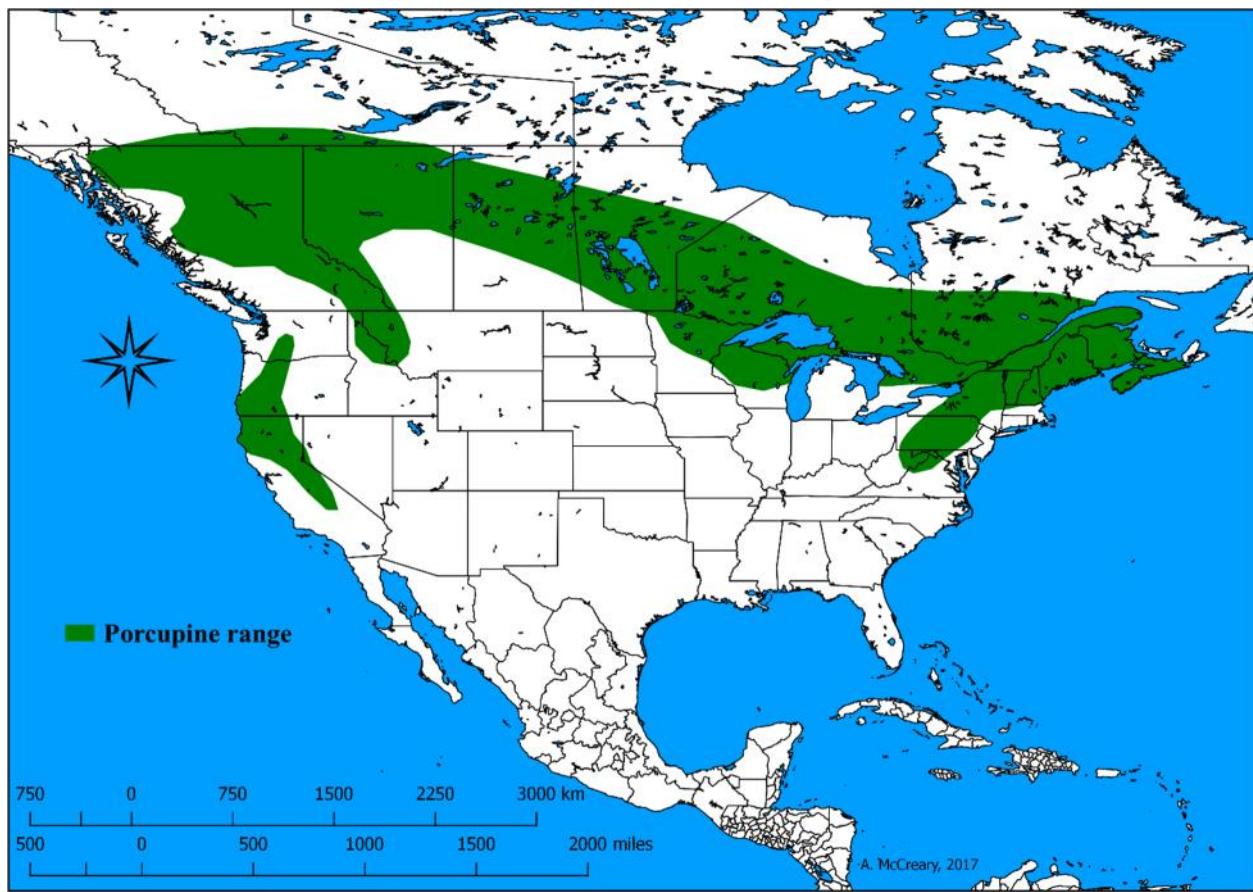
Fishers are the only animal that regularly preys on porcupines.

Sometimes known as a “fisher cat”, but it is not a cat, and it doesn’t eat much fish.

They can rotate their hind feet almost 180°, which lets them descend from trees headfirst.

Range and Status

Fishers are exclusive to the northern section of North America. Their range extends across Canada, down into the northeastern US, as well as into portions of the Pacific Northwest. Fishers are a territorial species, so they occur at naturally low densities throughout their range. They also have a low reproductive capacity, so they are highly susceptible to overharvest by humans. Their populations declined severely during colonial times due to over-trapping, but careful management has stabilized their numbers.



Management and Research in New York

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the DEC began a program to reintroduce fishers to the Catskill region of New York. Combined with recovery of forest habitat, the program was successful and regulated trapping of fishers is permitted. Starting in 2013, the DEC paired with Cornell University to track fisher population and distribution using camera traps and hair snares.

Pictures



A male fisher, attracted to some bait placed in view of a trail camera at Dyken Pond.





At Dyken Pond

Fisher tracks are often seen along the trails at Dyken Pond. They are also frequent visitors to our camera traps, as can be seen in the series of pictures above. Fishers were an uncommon mammal here until about 20 years ago. Maturing forests have provided more extensive habitat for them to spread throughout the region. Today, they are one of the most common tracks we find in winter.

Links

More information on fishers can be found at the following links:

New York State fisher management plan

http://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/wildlife_pdf/nyfishermgmtplan.pdf

The Conservationist Magazine article on the fisher

<http://www.dec.ny.gov/pubs/99836.html>

Best management practices for trapping fisher

http://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/wildlife_pdf/trapbmmpsfisher.pdf

Sources

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