

Raccoon Scare in Southern Alberta

Just after the above stories had been written, the *Edmonton Journal* (November 1) carried a news item stating that raccoon sightings are way up in the south of the province. A zoologist with the Alberta Institute for Wildlife Conservation warned that the animals could become a huge problem unless steps were taken to control the population. "They don't only get in your garbage, but they carry rabies and they can be

quite vicious if you approach them."

In August, six raccoons killed near Lethbridge tested positive for canine distemper, a viral infection that can pass between raccoons and dogs. David Ealey, a spokesman for Alberta Sustainable Resource Development, was quoted to the effect that the outbreak served as a warning. As the raccoon population increases, so will encounters with pets. According to the *Journal* story, Alberta Fish and Wildlife officials are urging people to inform them at once if someone spots a raccoon in an urban area.



The Fisher of our Aspen Parklands

Story and photos by Gilbert Proulx

The fisher, *Martes pennanti*, is a member of the weasel family. It has a long and slender body (51-63 cm) with a dense dark brown to black fur coat, a bushy tail and strong short legs. The male (2.7-5.4 kg) is twice as large as the female (1.4-3.2 kg). The fisher occurs in all of the Canadian provinces and territories except Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island. In Alberta, it is found in the mountains along the B.C. border, in the boreal forest —mostly above 54° N— and west of Drayton Valley. However, its provincial range originally extended from the North Saskatchewan River to the Northwest Territories border. In the early 1900s, with unregulated trapping and the use of strychnine for predator control, fishers disappeared from central Alberta. Here, in this fragmented region, only a release program would reestablish this furbearer in its former range.

In the late 1980s, a number of fishers, captured in Ontario and Manitoba, were kept in simulated natural environments at the Vegreville facilities of the Alberta Research Council. As head of the wildlife section, I supervised behavioural studies of these animals, which eventually led to the development of the first-ever humane traps for this

species. At the end of the study, 17 fishers, plus 3 juveniles born in captivity, were "surplus." We decided to release them in the Elk Island/Blackfoot/Ministik complex of mixed wood boreal forest and aspen parkland. The 20 animals were radio-collared and let go in March and June 1990, and we followed them until August 1992.

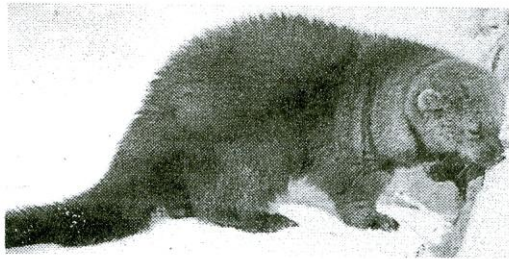


Within 24 hours of their March release, some of the fishers left the area and travelled long distances. Four weeks later, they were found more than 30 km away. The animals crossed roads, grasslands and wetlands, and often relocated in woodlots. We know that four of them died due to fights with other released fishers, predation by a bird of prey, and a car collision. These long-distance movements may have been related to breeding and to exploration of an unfamiliar environment at a time of year when the

vegetation cover is reduced and food sources are limited. In contrast, fishers released in June remained in the vicinity of their release sites within deciduous forests. At that time of year, there was a dense canopy and abundant food such as fruits, small mammals, birds, eggs and frogs. Furthermore, during summer these animals were not searching for mates. No deaths were recorded. Females occupied areas that averaged 15 km². The home ranges of males averaged 24 km². These fishers used deciduous stands more often than coniferous forest and they avoided scrubs and open fields.

The release program allowed us to demonstrate that such reintroductions are more effective when the animals are set free in summer rather than in late winter. It also demonstrated that, in the aspen parklands, fisher survival did not depend on the presence of large expanses of coniferous cover. However, a high tree canopy and a well-developed understory were necessary to provide fishers with protection and food throughout the year.

In 1993, when we stopped monitoring and I left the Alberta Research Council, male fishers were still in proximity to females. Sightings had been reported in Elk Island National Park, the Blackfoot Multipurpose Recreation Area, and the Strathcona Wilderness Centre. The same year, a young fisher was captured in a beaver trap. The encouraging thing about this record was that it proved that reproduction had occurred. On the other hand, it was distressing. Fishers are easily trapped and susceptible to over-harvesting because of their relatively low natality and large home ranges.



The fisher, also known as pekan, looks like an oversized pine marten, but it has a blunter face.

Furthermore, we learned that some local landowners had killed fishers with poison and by running them down with snowmobiles.

Until recently, the status of the reintroduced population was uncertain. The finding of a road-killed fisher by Leonard Peleshok in March 2003 (see above) is highly interesting as it suggests that our released fisher population has survived. It is unlikely that this animal dispersed from a remote northern population, and it feels good to know that the fisher is part of the aspen parklands biodiversity. Let's do our best to protect this wildlife habitat by slowing down the fragmentation of forests for industrial and residential uses.

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I also invite you to join the *Martes* Working Group, an international Organisation dedicated to the conservation and management of martens, sables and fishers (www.martes.laurentian.ca). Finally, the following publications discuss fisher reintroduction and ecology in detail:

Badry, M.J., G. Proulx, and P.M. Woodard. 1997. Habitat use by fishers in the aspen parkland of Alberta. Pages 233-251 in G. Proulx, H.N. Bryant, and P.M. Woodard (Eds.). *Martes: taxonomy, ecology, techniques and management*. Provincial Museum of Alberta, Edmonton.

Proulx, G., et al. 2004. World distribution and status of the genus *Martes* in 2000. Pages 21-76 in D.J. Harrison, A.K. Fuller, and G. Proulx (Eds.). *Martens and fisher in human-altered landscapes: an international perspective*. Springer, New York.

Proulx, G., A. Kolenosky, M. Badry, R. Drescher, K. Seidel, and P. Cole. 1994. Post release movements of translocated fishers. Pages 197-203 in S.W. Buskirk, A.S. Harestad, M.G. Raphael, and R.A. Powell (Eds.). *Martens, sables and fishers: biology and conservation*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York.

More on rare mammals in central Alberta.

An upcoming ENN will feature the cougar. What is its current status in Elk Island National Park?

Also in ENN, coyote predation on the Long-tailed Weasel.