

# The Fisher

By Thomas L. Serfass  
and  
Denise H. Mitcheltree



## What are fishers?

Fishers are swift and elegant tree-climbing furbearers. Like the river otter, mink, skunk and pine marten, fishers are members of the Mustelid or weasel family. As with most mustelids, the fisher possesses an elongated body and has relatively short legs. About the size of house cats, adult fishers typically weigh between four and 12 pounds and measure between 30 and 47 inches from the nose to the tip of the tail. In most cases, male fishers are larger than females. In fact, males usually weigh twice as much as females. The heaviest fisher on record was a male trapped in Maine that weighed 20 pounds, 2 ounces.

At a distance, the fisher's long fur appears to be a solid glossy black. However, upon close inspection, the tricolored guard hairs surrounding the face and shoulders give this area of the fisher's body a golden silvery sheen. There is considerable individual variation in the color of a fisher's fur as well as in the shape of white or cream patches of fur that occur on the under-side of the neck, chest and abdomen.

Fishers need continuous forested areas for their survival; they are unlikely to venture into unforested areas. Although conifers have often been described as an essential habitat component, fishers occur in both conifer and mixed forests.

Most people familiar with fishers are aware of their extraordinary ability to climb trees. High above the forest floor, the agile animals locate cavities for denning, rest in abandoned owl and hawk nests, or pursue squirrels, porcupines and other prey. Fishers do travel extensive distances over land, though, and most foraging occurs on the forest floor.

Like many solitary predators, fishers maintain low population densities and a large home range. Home ranges may approach 30 square miles for males and about 12 square miles for females. Female fishers are sexually mature when one year old, while males don't normally achieve sexual maturity until their second year. Breeding occurs in the spring and the overall gestation period lasts almost a year. Fishers have relatively low reproductive rates, producing one litter a year that averages around two or three cubs, which are born and raised in a tree cavity. Young fishers develop rapidly and are weaned at five to eight weeks, but do not disperse from the natal area and venture out on their own until about six months of age.

Fishers are solitary, opportunistic predators. The name is a misnomer; it does not reflect the animal's food habits. In fact, fishers seldom if ever hunt for fish. When hunting, fishers do not seek out a specific prey item. Instead, they select prey based on abundance and catchability. Consequently, the diet varies considerably by geographic region. In most parts of the fisher's range, mice, shrews, squirrels, chipmunks and porcupines are important prey items. In northern areas such as Wisconsin and Minnesota, fishers often prey on snowshoe hares and grouse. Food acquired by scavenging also constitutes a significant portion of the fisher's diet. For example, in many areas, gut piles and deer carcasses provide fishers with an abundant late-fall and winter source of food. When available, apples, nuts and other fruits are readily fed upon by fishers.

Because of their varied diet and low densities, fishers do

not appear to affect most prey populations. Fishers are among the few animals that regularly prey on porcupines, though, and are known to control porcupine populations. In fact, some states have reintroduced fishers for the purpose of reducing porcupine numbers.

### Fishers in Pennsylvania

When pioneers began settling here, fishers were widely distributed throughout our forested regions. Unfortunately, the animals were unable to cope with the combined forces of unregulated trapping and timber cutting during the 1800s and, as a result, fishers were essentially eliminated from the commonwealth by the early 1900s.

Declines in fisher populations were not unique to Pennsylvania. Historical records indicate that fishers occurred throughout forested regions of Canada and the northern United States. In the eastern United States, fishers ranged from Maine to North Carolina. Many of these populations also suffered severe declines because of over trapping and destruction of forested habitats.

Because of improved timber and furbearer management, fishers have recovered in other portions of their historic range. In fact, reintroduction projects have restored fisher populations to West Virginia and the Catskill Mountains in southeastern New York. Fishers reintroduced into West Virginia have expanded their range to include forested habitats in Western Maryland. Fishers in Maryland have been gradually expanding their range towards Pennsylvania, and during the 1994 trapping season a fisher that presumably dispersed from Maryland was accidentally caught by a trapper in Somerset County in southwestern Pennsylvania. To date, three fishers have been caught in Somerset County. Fishers from the Catskills also may eventually expand their range to include portions of northeastern Pennsylvania.

Return of large tracts of forested habitat in many areas of Pennsylvania, regulated trapping seasons, and evidence of success in reestablishing fishers in surrounding states suggest that fisher populations can be restored to portions of Pennsylvania. To accomplish this, the Pennsylvania Fisher Reintroduction Project was initiated in 1994 as a cooperative venture between the Pennsylvania State University and the Game Commission to restore this handsome, native component of the state's wildlife community to northcentral Pennsylvania.

Based on examination of potential fisher habitats, the expansive forested landscape of northcentral Pennsylvania – areas from the Allegheny National Forest to eastern Sullivan County – were identified as potential fisher habitat. In December 1994, the first fishers were released,



into the Sproul State Forest in Clinton County. Fishers used in the reintroduction program are obtained from New York and New Hampshire. If the introduction program goes as planned, 90 to 150 fishers will be released in three to five locations in northcentral Pennsylvania in the years to follow. To assure that adequate forested habitats persist for long-term sustainability of fisher populations, all reintroductions are planned to occur on large tracts of public lands managed by the Pennsylvania Bureau of Forestry, Game Commission, or Allegheny National Forest.

The foremost purpose of the reintroduction project is to restore a component of Pennsylvania's wildlife heritage. Reintroduction of the fisher will provide outdoor enthusiasts the potential to view one of North America's rarest and most interesting furbearers. Fishers may also serve as an important natural predator of porcupines. Although reintroduced fishers will initially be protected from harvest, fisher fur is highly esteemed by the fashion industry, and the reintroduction may eventually result in an additional fur resource for Pennsylvania trappers. Because forested habitats are once again plentiful throughout northcentral Pennsylvania, there is a high probability that a fisher reintroduction project can succeed. We hope, with continued wise forest and wildlife management practices, reintroduced fishers will form the nucleus of a population that expands throughout large portions of northcentral Pennsylvania and persists for the enjoyment of future generations of Pennsylvanians.

This Wildlife Note is available from the  
Pennsylvania Game Commission  
Bureau of Information and Education  
Dept. MS, 2001 Elmerton Ave.,  
Harrisburg, PA 17110-9797

An Equal Opportunity Employer