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Fishers are like woodland ninjas, these stealthy cat-sized members of the weasel family are the embodiment of the word "elusive." They move quietly through the forests largely unseen, even by those that have spent much of their lives in wooded areas.

The fisher is a member of the weasel family, resembling a very large mink. It weighs as much as a red fox, but has much shorter legs. Fishers are extremely agile and active predators. Excellent tree climbers, they can out climb martens & red squirrels.

The fisher is a remarkable predator and is one of a very few animals that can kill a porcupine. Which is where they tie in to an interesting forest management connection...

With a scarcity of natural predators, porcupines have recently flourished in the woodlands of Minnesota. The overabundance of "Quill Pigs" can pose a problem for forest managers. By forestry standards, porcupines have many bad habits. Porcupines damage, and often kill, trees by gnawing on them.

Elusive Forest Dwellers

Your woodlands, a habitat for Fishers

Is it possible to allow nature to assist us in forest management?

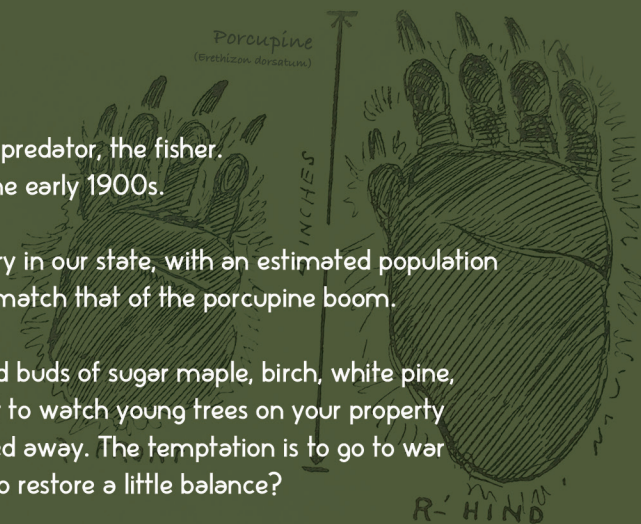


The porcupine problem

Porcupine numbers used to be widely held in check by their primary predator, the fisher. That is until fishers were trapped to the point of near extinction by the early 1900s.

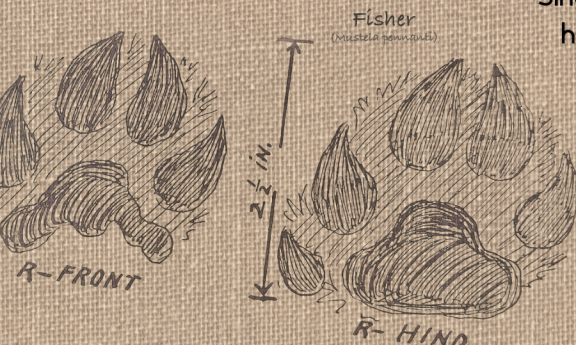
Since then the fisher population has made a slow and steady recovery in our state, with an estimated population of around ten thousand. However their population has not grown to match that of the porcupine boom.

The damage porcupines do because of their appetite for the bark and buds of sugar maple, birch, white pine, and hemlock can be troubling for woodland landowners. It is difficult to watch young trees on your property slowly succumb to death because the protective bark is being chewed away. The temptation is to go to war with the prickly critters... but what if there was a more natural way to restore a little balance?



Is there room for some outside the box forest management thinking?

Why fight nature when we can work in harmony with it? Would encouraging the presence of fishers naturally balance the issues that sometimes arise with porcupine? Some states in the mountain west region have done just that. In fact, a total of 188 fishers were relocated from British Columbia to the northern Rockies by the Department of Fish and Game over about three decades. The hope was that this would be enough for fisher populations to re-establish themselves in the vast wooded mountain scape, and ultimately protect forests from the over foraging of rapidly growing porcupine populations.



Since we already have a foundational population of fisher here in Minnesota, keeping them on the landscape is important for the US Forest Service and private woodland landowners to keep in mind. Encouraging and protecting the fisher numbers we have is much easier than attempting to re-introduce them down the road. What can be done to keep them here? What kind of habitat do they thrive in? How do we know if they are already present on the landscape?

Fishers are one of the only species of animal that can kill a porcupine.



Habitat requirements of the fisher

We know generally that fishers are drawn to big trees. Fishers prefer large areas of connected woodlands, particularly older timber stands. Since they prefer to avoid traveling in large open areas, fishers opt for mixed forest habitat with heavy canopy cover. They are also found at the edges of conifer stands when these are adjacent to stands of deciduous trees. The average home range of a fisher is around 15 square miles in size. Fishers are solitary creatures. They live alone, and control several square miles of territory. As is the case with many animal species, male fishers have territories that overlap with several females. Despite this, interactions outside of breeding are minimal.

Female fishers are choosy when it comes to dens. They look for tree cavities that have an opening large enough for them, but too small for other predators.

These mammals live only in areas with dense forests. In fact, they avoid forests with less than 50% tree coverage.

Landowner thoughts



John Rajala
Minnesota Timber & Millwork
10,000 acres of woodlands.

"Those of us who live and work in Minnesota's great north woods are blessed to still have many of the pieces of an ecologically authentic and natural environment. It is critical that landowners work together with skilled guidance to preserve as many acres as possible and as close as possible to their ecologically authentic condition. We are careful to mimic natural woodland disturbances with our timber harvest activities.

For the fisher, we keep large dying and dead trees, and maintain lots of healthy big trees in a continuous diverse mix of both deciduous and coniferous forest types.

It all fits together, the trees, the fisher, and even the porcupine. If we want to keep this as our home, we need to properly manage woodlands as their home as well."

"It all fits together, the trees, the fisher, and even the porcupine."

Forming a plan . . .

Forest stewardship plans

A management plan can help you get the most out of your property and maximize the potential benefits. Your local SWCD can help you develop a natural property management plan.

A forest stewardship plan written by a certified plan writer, such as your local SWCD, the DNR or a private forest planner, qualifies landowners to apply for local or state tax-relief and incentive programs. To qualify for one of these programs, a landowner must generally have at least 20 qualifying acres of land.

The DNR's Forest Stewardship Program helps landowners finalize their own goals and prepare a professional, voluntary management plan for their woodland. A forest management plan (also known as a Woodland Stewardship Plan when written by a certified writer), is a non-binding, written document that lists your land's potential, what you want to accomplish, and specific actions you can take to accomplish those goals within a given time-frame.

Want to establish a balanced predator/prey habitat in your woodlands? Contact us to get started on a Forest Stewardship Plan

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