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Perhaps no other animal in our region is as maligned and misunderstood as the fisher. Commonly called a “fisher cat,” this member of the weasel family is not nearly as large as some believe. It grows up to 112 cm / 43 in – with its long, bushy tail accounting for a third of its length -- and weighs between 1.5 to 6 kg / 3-13 lb. It has a thick fur coat in varying shades of brown, with darker points on the rump and tail. A long back and short legs give it a low-slung profile. Large, powerful paws tipped with partially retractable claws and hind limbs that can rotate 180 degrees enable the agile fisher to climb up and down trees with tremendous speed. In fact, it can even outclimb and overtake a squirrel. When traveling along the ground, the fisher moves with a rolling gait.

Primarily nocturnal, the secretive and shy fisher is rarely seen by people even where it is abundant. It does not hibernate, nor does it have a permanent den site, and it is solitary, except during the spring mating season. Once bred, the female fisher experiences a 10-11 month delayed implantation; yet, when the embryo finally implants in the womb the following spring, it develops in only 6 weeks. One to four kits are born blind and helpless in a maternity den. They remain fully dependant on their mother until around 4 months of age, when they can catch their own prey. Another thing you may find surprising: the fisher is really pretty quiet. Many YouTube recordings claiming to be “a fisher cat screaming” are actually recordings of red foxes, barn owls or raccoons.

Biologists classify the fisher as a “mesopredator,” or middle predator, just a step below apex predators in the food chain. The fisher hunts small mammals like rabbits, hares, squirrels and rodents; it also eats reptiles, amphibians, insects, fruit and berries. Contrary to its name, the “fisher cat” is not a feline, nor does it catch fish. It will, however, eat dead fish and carrion. It was once believed that the fisher kills porcupines by flipping them over. Half true! While the fisher is one of the few mammals that hunts porcupines, it kills them using a unique technique. The fisher repeatedly attacks the porcupine’s face, which lacks quills. Only when the victim is immobilized does the fisher flip it over to feed. Another half truth: the fisher purposefully stalks cats. Yes, a fisher will eat a cat in a chance encounter, but a free-roaming feline is far more likely to get hit by a car or mauled by a neighbourhood dog. Often unjustly fingered as the perpetrator for any missing tabby, the fisher really prefers targeting natural prey. However, while attacks on pets are not common, they do occur. Here, in its eastern range, the fisher faces very few natural threats, because top predators, like wolves and mountain lions, have been removed. The scarcity of its natural predators may embolden the fisher to venture into more open spaces, which it typically avoids. Therefore, where properties border on woodlands, supervision of small pets and domestic fowl is recommended, especially at night and in the winter, when natural prey is less abundant. Also, bird feeders and brush piles that attract squirrels and rabbits may also draw in a hungry fisher looking for its favourite prey.

The feisty fisher was nearly eradicated by early settlers, but it has made a strong comeback, proving, once again, the incredible resiliency of nature.

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Photo Credit: Tammy Nash

*Margie is a self-proclaimed nature nerd with a passion for all things finned, furred and feathered...even the creepy-crawly-scaly kinds. She's summured on Wolfe Lake since childhood and loves sharing what she learns about our wild things.*