



Fisher

Fishers (*Pekania pennanti*) are one of Rhode Island's most thoroughly misunderstood animals. The fisher, commonly referred to by its misnomer "fisher cat," is not a cat but a member of the Mustelidae family, which also includes wolverines, martens, river otters, mink, and weasels. While definitely an efficient predator, like many of its relatives, fishers are most impressive in their ability to infiltrate small livestock pens with apparent ease. Once common throughout North American and Canadian forests, fisher populations decreased dramatically in the 1800s and early 1900s due to wide-scale deforestation and unregulated over harvesting. Over the past decades fisher populations have begun to recover thanks in part to forest restoration, agency reintroduction efforts, and science-based wildlife management programs. Today, fishers occupy a large portion of their former historic range.

IDENTIFICATION

Fishers have an elongated body with short legs, large feet and a dark bushy tail. They have a pointed snout and rounded ears. Their fur is dark brown to black with white patches on the chest and abdomen.

Length: 36-48 in

Weight: Males 9-15 lbs, females: 4-6 lbs

Lifespan: 10 years

LIFE HISTORY

Range and Habitat: Fishers are a forest dependent species, occurring in a variety of forested habitats such as upland hardwood, coniferous, mixed, second growth and old growth forests. Availability of prey plays an important part in habitat selection and abundance.

Efforts to reintroduce fishers into their former range have proven successful in a number of states including Massachusetts, Connecticut, Vermont, New York, Virginia and Wisconsin. There have been no reintroduction programs in Rhode Island. Fishers currently found in Rhode Island are decedents of individuals that dispersed from persistent populations in New Hampshire.

Evidence of this lineage was found during DNA studies conducted by the University of Vermont on tissue samples collected from Rhode Island fishers. The New Hampshire population has been the source of fishers that now occupy central and eastern Massachusetts, eastern Connecticut and all of Rhode Island.

In Rhode Island, fishers are generally common in Providence, Kent, and Washington counties where there is appropriate habitat. In recent years they have become established in Bristol County and mainland portions of Newport County. They do not occur on the islands of Narragansett Bay or Block Island. This reoccupation of former range coincides with protection from exploitation and the regrowth of forests within New England.

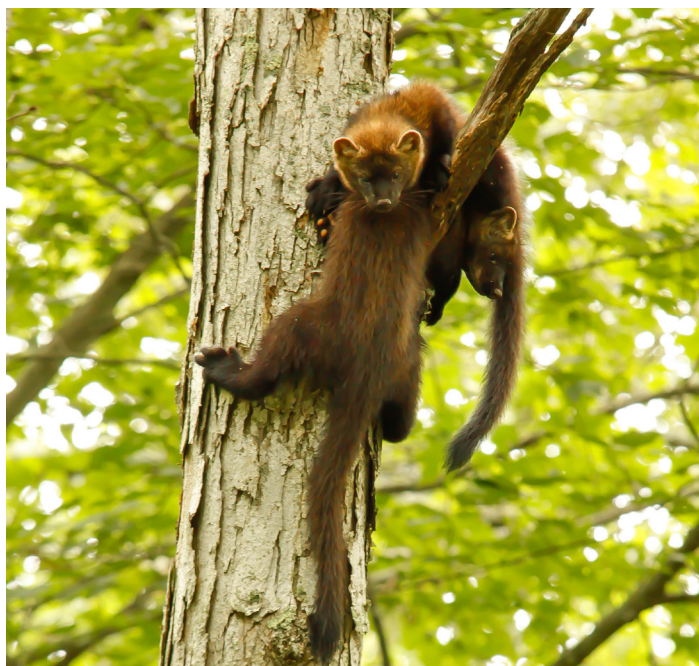
Behavior: Fishers are solitary, aside from their breeding season, which occurs between March and April. Fishers are mostly nocturnal but can be active during daylight hours. They can be seen traveling on stone walls at night or resting high up in conifers during the day. Fishers are active year-round but will seek out temporary dens in hollow logs or under rock outcroppings when temperatures drop or to rest when not hunting for food. As is characteristic of other mustelids, fishers possess anal scent glands that contain a musky, strong smelling fluid. Scent and scat are used to mark "scent stations," such as stumps or stones, along travel corridors, and are used to define territories.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Fishers are excellent climbers and have retractable claws.
- Fishers can rotate their hind feet almost 180°, allowing them to descend trees headfirst.
- The "screaming" call heard during spring and summer nights is actually made by red foxes, not fishers.
- The word fisher may have originated from the French word "fitchet," used to describe the similar European polecat.
- Fishers are one of the few predators that will attempt to take porcupines.

Food Habits: Although excellent climbers, most hunting activity takes place on the ground where easily captured prey is available. Fishers are opportunistic predators, consuming any animal that they can capture and kill, however, gray and red squirrels along with small mammals such as mice, voles, and chipmunks are the mainstays of their diet. Fishers also utilize carrion (dead animals). They will eat a variety of fruits (blueberries, autumn olive, crabapples, grapes) and nuts (beechnuts, acorns) when available. They will readily eat pet food left outside for cats and dogs. Examination of stomach contents of fishers in Rhode Island shows the most common food items include small mammals such as mice, voles, red, gray, and flying squirrels, as well as birds and an occasional snake, frog, insect, or fish.

Reproduction: In the northeast, breeding season for fishers occurs during April, immediately following birth of young. Fishers, like other mustelids, have delayed implantation, a process whereby the fertilized egg does not immediately implant in the uterus, but remains dormant until approximately ten months after fertilization. Following implantation, the embryo develops within 30 to 60 days, with birth usually taking place the following March or April. Females have one litter per year consisting of two or three young, called kits. Males do not participate in the care of the kits. Cavities within trees are used almost exclusively for natal den sites for the first few months, then females frequently move litters around to different den sites. Fishers use brush piles, hollow logs, tree cavities, vacant gray squirrel nests and rock piles as temporary resting sites. Females nurse the young until they are almost fully grown (5 months) and able to catch prey on their own. Fishers become sexual mature after one year and will reproduce the following spring, at two years of age.



Fisher kits, Dean Birch

Diseases: Fishers harbor [ticks](#) and fleas but otherwise have relatively few parasites and incidence of disease is relatively low. [Rabies](#), which can affect any mammal, has been confirmed only once in a fisher in Rhode Island and only a few field studies have documented [sarcoptic mange](#) in fishers (Lovallo, 2008).

REGULATORY STATUS

Fishers are classified under general law (*RIGL 20-16-1*) as a protected furbearer in Rhode Island. Harvest is strictly regulated by the DEM's Division of Fish and Wildlife to ensure the long-term viability of fisher populations in the state. Carcass collection from trappers and roadkills provides valuable biological information, such as population age structure, dietary habits and reproductive potential. The taking of road-killed furbearers, including fisher, is prohibited without special authorization from the Division of Fish and Wildlife. The law also does not allow for the random taking of wildlife, for the taking of furbearers for their pelts outside the open season, or for killing of animals outside the boundaries of the property of the person with the problem. It does not allow for unlawful methods of take such as poisons, snares, foothold traps, or discharge of firearms in violation of state or local ordinances. The law states that animals taken must be reported to the DEM within 24 hours. The DEM does not recommend that property owners attempt to live trap nuisance furbearers unless they are prepared and willing to euthanize the offending animal. State regulations prohibit the live capture and translocation of furbearers. Captured furbearers can only legally be released on the property on which they were captured.

TIPS TO PROTECT LIVESTOCK AND PETS:

- Bring all animals in before dark.
- Bury enclosure fencing at least 1 foot down on all sides.
- Cover the top of outdoor enclosures.
- Frequently check enclosures for holes.
- Remove other potential food sources, such as outdoor pet dishes, unsecure trash bins, compost piles

Never intentionally feed wildlife.

It is illegal in Rhode Island and will create problems for humans and wildlife alike.

For more information about solving problems with wildlife visit: www.wildlifehelp.org