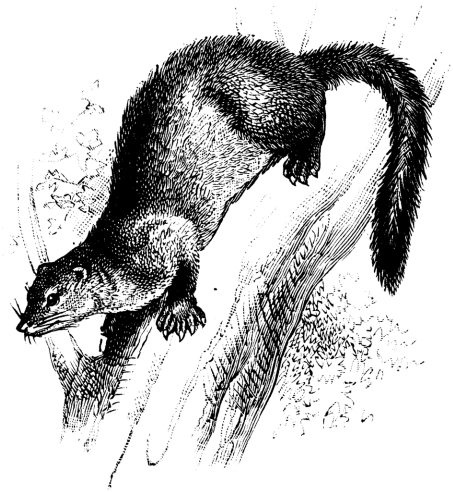


Creature Feature: Winter 2013

By W. Scott Douglas

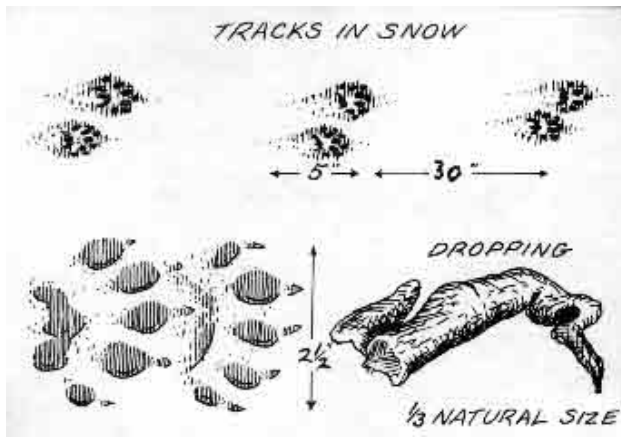
Fisher Cat (*Martes pennanti*)

Recently, Hans Reimann reported seeing an animal in his woods in Springtown which he had never seen. He saw it for just a quick moment as it perched on a log, but it moved away quickly when it scented him. It was dark brown and fox-like, but moved with the liquid grace of an otter. I asked him if it was another mink, which we reported on a while back, but he said that it was much too large, and lighter colored. While Hans was hoping that it was in fact an otter, I think it more likely that he saw a Fisher. I have heard that Fishers are moving back into Pennsylvania from western Maryland and New York, but have not seen one since my childhood in Vermont. According to their website, the PA Game Commission has been experimenting with releases onto State gamelands in the hopes of re-establishing a viable population.



The Fisher (*Martes pennanti*), or Fisher cat, is one of those rare carnivores that many people have never even heard of, much less seen. The Fisher is not a cat at all, but a member of the weasel family (Mustelidae). Fishers are secretive and need 20-30 square miles of relatively undeveloped, hilly, mature forest to thrive. Despite its name, the Fisher is not a cat, but a wary, irritable and large member of the weasel family, second in size only to the wolverine. Typical size is 4-12 lbs, but males as large as 20 lbs have been recorded. While this may not seem very large, they are 30-47" nose tip to tail, making it a pretty large animal to run into in the woods, especially when it's cranky. The Fisher is a beautiful animal, dark brown with black feet and tail, with variable patches of cream on its belly and neck. Its coat is luxurious, which made it a popular trapping target. This, and deforestation, lead to its extirpation from most of the mid Atlantic states in the early 20th century.

Fishers breed in late winter and early spring, shortly after giving birth to 2-3 cubs. Males do not assist in rearing the cubs; in fact they leave the female's territory after breeding. The den is usually in a tree cavity, but if one is not available, females will utilize rock ledges or brush piles. The cubs are heavily dependent on the female for 5-8 weeks, and are independent by six months; in time for their first winter. Sexual maturity is at 1-2 years.



Fishers are generalist feeders, taking small mammals, amphibians and birds, and larger males can even take down Bobcat, Lynx and small deer. They are famous for their ability to kill and eat porcupines, by first attacking their face and then flipping the unfortunate beast onto its back. Fishers are brazen enough to take domestic cats and even small dogs as prey, and are also well known as raiders of chicken coops and compost piles. They readily feed on carrion of all kinds, and I imagine that this may be the reason they are credited with taking deer. Man is by far their biggest enemy,

but Bobcat and Lynx consider turnabout fair play. Bear are also known to prey on Fishers.

It is due to our enormous efforts here in our Watershed that we have the privilege of seeing Fishers again. Large tracts of undisturbed forest are needed to support Fishers, as well as Bobcat and other larger carnivores. It is a sign that our management and stewardship efforts are paying off. While you may never see a Fisher in your backyard, their cry is similar to the hair raising, dying baby-like scream of a fox. If you want, there are many recordings of Fisher cries on the internet. Fisher tracks are distinctive, with the obvious heavy claw marks and turned-in aspect. If you happen to see a Fisher, or signs, please let us know about it by dropping me a line at info@cooks creekpa.org.