

Martens, Fishers and Wolverines

by Dennis Coules

Of the many species of fur-bearing mammals found in California, the marten, fisher and wolverine are the most dependent on wilderness conditions for survival. All are found in dense old-growth forests in North America, with the wolverine also ranging occasionally into more alpine areas of the Cascades and the Sierra Nevada. Not surprisingly, these species have become quite scarce in California and are only occasionally seen. All are protected under California state law and may not be taken at any time.

Members of the family Mustelidae, these three carnivores are related to the weasel, mink, ferret, skunk, badger and otter. Many members of the weasel family are noted for their ferocity and bloodthirsty predaceous habits. They often play an important role in control of the populations of rodents and other herbivores.

The American pine marten, *Martes americana*, is found in California chiefly in dense spruce, fir and lodgepole pine forests at elevations ranging from 4,000 to 13,000 feet. It is about the size of a house cat, with a bushy tail half as long as the body. A yellow-orange throat patch on the white dark brown

as well as rabbits, rats, insects, berries, nuts and a variety of other foods. It is chiefly nocturnal and may be observed at dusk. The only one I have observed growled very convincingly when approached too closely, with a voice much too menacingly deep for its size. Few animals prey on the marten, but fishers, lynx and great horned owls have been known to do so occasionally.

Like most Mustelids, martens are solitary and only associate during the breeding season in July and August. At this time males may engage in fatal combat. There are usually three young per litter, born in April. The marten may live 17 years or more. Its curiosity, however, makes it a very easy animal to trap.

The fisher, *Martes pennanti*, is found in remote areas of mixed coniferous forest, yellow pine, red fir and lodgepole pine. In California it is found in the Sierra Nevada between Yosemite and Sequoia National Parks and in old-growth forests of the Northwest. It is most often found near watercourses and is an excellent swimmer. The fisher is nowhere common, and populations average only one per hundred square miles even in the

and sometimes irregular white spots on the throat and chest. This predator is active day or night and feeds on whatever it can overcome, including squirrels, martens, marmots, rabbits, raccoons, reptiles, foxes and lynx. It is the only animal that regularly preys on porcupines, which it may attack in the winter by tunneling underneath the snow to bite the unprotected neck or abdomen. It is one of the swiftest of climbers, and can race down tree trunks head first. The fisher gives birth to two to four young in May or June, denning in standing or fallen hollow trees or holes in rocky ledges.

The wolverine, *Gulo gulo* (previously *Gulo luscus*), is extremely rare in California, with only 15 individuals estimated to exist in 1933. It is found in the Sierra Nevada from Lake Tahoe south to the Kern gap, and recent sightings indicate a possible range expansion into Shasta and Trinity Counties and the Siskiyou Mountains. Remote areas of coniferous forest or alpine tundra comprise the wolverine's habitat.

The wolverine is the largest member of the weasel family at three feet in length and up to 45 pounds. The head and

the tail. There is a patch of light-colored fur at the base of the throat.

The Latin name *Gulo luscus* can be translated as "half-blind glutton," which refers both to its feeding habits and its unusual habit of sitting up on its haunches and shading its eyes with a forepaw when looking into the distance. The wolverine is active day



Fisher



Wolverine

or night and throughout the year. Food includes carrion, rodents and other small mammals and snow-bound deer or caribou. It reportedly also sometimes attacks and eats moose and bears. Much food is