

Wolverine

Genus species *Gulo gulo*

Family: Mustelid

Also known as Skunk Bear, Glutton,

By Darlene Goetz

*"Picture a weasel -- and most of us can do that,
for we have met that little demon of destruction,
that small atom of insensate courage, that symbol of slaughter,
sleeplessness, and tireless, incredible activity --
picture that scrap of demoniac fury, multiply that mite some fifty times,
and you have the likeness of a Wolverine."*

*Ernest Thompson Seton
"Lives of Game Animals". 1925 - 1928. Vol. II*

Characteristics

The wolverine is a bulky animal the size of a small bear. Ferocious and solitary, it has become a creature of myth and many a campfire story.

The wolverine has one of the most highly prized pelts of all fur bearing animals. The wolverine pelt is resistant to frost so was and still is heavily prized for lining parkas. Its fur is thick and glossy brown with a yellow or buff coloured stripe running down each side from neck to tail. Some may have a silvery facial mask similar to a ferret. White or yellow spots on the chest or hands and paws are not uncommon. It has a large broad head with small eyes and short rounded ears.

This animal is one of the strongest for its size. Its jaw completely suited for eating frozen carrion and can with its uncommonly strong legs and shoulders can easily take down an animal 10 times its size.

Males are larger than the females and can weigh anywhere from 11-18 kgs. Females weigh around 6-10 kgs.

They have semi retractable claws which mean they can partially pull them back in to allow for climbing trees. Also they walk on the soles of their feet they are perfectly adapted for travelling long distances in soft snow.

Life Cycle

A female Wolverine reaches sexual maturity at around 15 months, males at around 2 years of age. Males tend to be polygamous which means they will mate with a variety of females. The mating season takes place between June – August. Even though the males are polygamous they do tend to stay close to the females and will do so even after the young are born.

Ovulation is stimulated by coitus however the fertilized egg will remain in the blastocyst stage for several months until sometime around March. This is called “delayed implantation”. It is a natural way of ensuring the young are born when food is most available. The gestation period is 30-40 days, so the young (called kits or cubs) are born in the early spring when the snow is thawing and new shoots are available.

A female will typically give birth to 5 or 6 young however some will die from starvation or be eaten by predators. Generally 1 or 2 survive to adulthood.

In the early winter the female will nest in a natural rock formation usually underneath the snow in alpine or tundra areas.

She will dig a long (sometimes 2 meters or more) tunnel to reach it and will line it with soft down and leaves. Females, for unknown reasons, will always find a new den for birthing. Most probably she feels the kits will be safer from predators in a new location.

The kits are born with full white coats. Their eyes are closed and their teeth have not yet come through. They weigh, on average 84 grams and are, from rump to head around 120mm long.

The young will be weaned at 8-10 weeks and then will begin to venture out on their own. They are taught how to feed and survive by other family members including brothers and sisters and even by their fathers, if he is still around. They will stay with their family group until 2 years of age when they are sexually mature and then will venture out on their own to begin the cycle again. Natural lifespan for the wolverine is, at best, 17 years.

Habitat

The wolverine is a solitary animal preferring to be far away from any human interaction. It prefers sub-alpine Arctic and tundra settings.

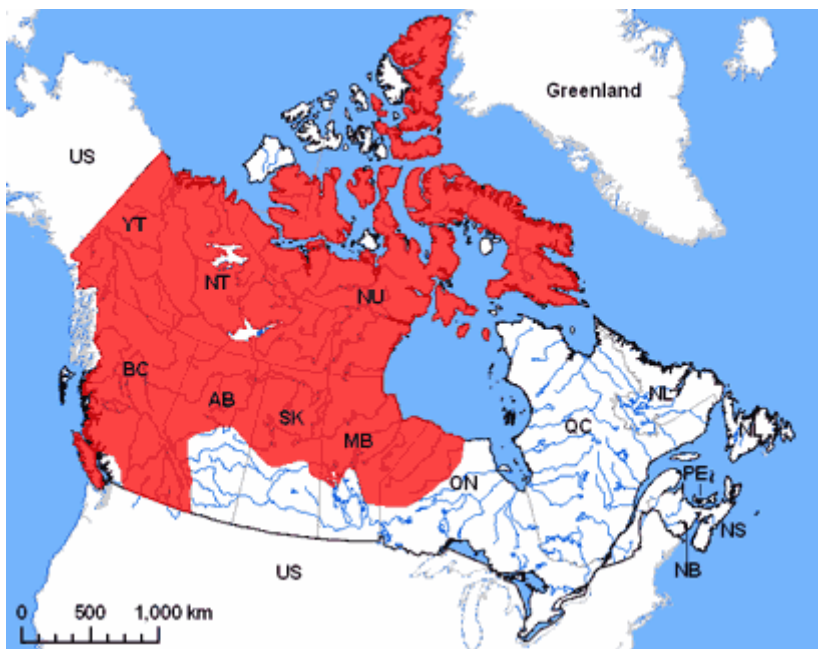
This animal has the largest home range of any carnivore of similar size. The average range for an adult male can be up to 1000 square kms and 100 square kms for an adult female. Because of this large range and the rarity of sighting one, it's difficult to determine exactly how they live and where they are located as well as accurate population estimates.

The Wolverine inhabits primarily Northern isolated areas. Northern Canada, Alaska, Siberia, Scandanavia, Russia and the Baltic. The primary population is

in Northern Canada however some have been spotted in the Rocky Mountains as far south as Northern California.

Historically, before Europeans settled in North America, wolverines inhabited a large area of Canada and Alaska with small settlements in the Northern United States. They inhabited most areas except hot dry areas.

All-terrain vehicles and snowmobiles as well as helicopter skiing has brought the human population ever closer to their dens. Thus moving them further and further into an already reduced natural habitat.



Wolverine Range.

Courtesy of Species at Risk Public Registry

http://www.sararegistry.gc.ca/species/speciesDetails_e.cfm?sid=172

Behaviour

Wolverines are scavengers. They can consume a large portion of meat at one kill, this behaviour is where they got their nickname the “glutton”. Wolverine tend to follow larger predators, such as wolves and bears, to scavenge their leftovers. They will sometimes wait until that animal has had its fill then go in and take away the carcass or in some cases have been known to take on a wolf or a black bear to steal the kill away. Wolverine are strong predators however in their own regard and are capable of bringing caribou, animals that are ten times their size.

In addition, wolverine are known to eat eggs, ground squirrels, snowshoe hare and other small mammals. The female with kits will rely on a diet of small animals such as squirrels and snowshoe hares, bringing them back to the den for her kits to feed. It is not known how her kits learn to kill but it is assumed they learn by watching their mother and by instinct.

Wolverines also hide their excess food. They will hide it in rocky crevices or will bury it and come back later to retrieve it.

Wolverines make a harsh, guttural snarling sound. Similar to the sound of a growling dog. (see web link in bibliography section to hear it). During mating season they may make a yelping sound.

Skunk bear is the other name given to the wolverine. They are a member of the same family as the skunk and have well developed anal glands used for marking their territory as well as when frightened.

Threats

The greatest threat to the wolverine are humans. They do not have any natural animal predators but human encroachment on their territory is pushing them further and further into close proximity of each other.

They are solitary night dwelling animals and very little information exists about their population but it is known they are dwindling. Only in Northern Canada are the numbers considered "stable" however with snowmobiles, helicopter skiing, all terrain vehicles and the ever present hunter only with close observation and closing down of areas to hunting and access will the population stop declining.

Wolverine pelts are still one of the most prized furs because of it's beauty and frost resistance. The Inuit and Dene in Northern Canada use this pelt to line parkas, mittens, gloves and hats. It is a high valued skin going for as much as \$400 a pelt. Over 80 percent of the furs sold in Canada come from the NorthWest Territories, Nunavut, Yukon and British Columbia. They number from 400 – 600 per year.

Currently there is a recovery plan being written to increase wolverine populations and bring them back to Eastern Canada. Some zoos have been successful breeding in captivity and it is the hope these animals will eventually be reintroduced to the wild and will be breeding on their own. Before this can be done there needs to be large habitat safe from hunting and human encroachment. The recovery plan is taking all of this into account.

What We Can Do To Help

There are very simple ways human can help halt the decline of the wolverine. Stay out of their area, avoid interaction with them, leave them alone. Don't hunt

them; hunting and trapping are the number one cause of the decline in their population.

Support a zoo in your area that is working on rehabilitating or breeding the wolverine in captivity. Generally these organizations are not government funded and need both financial and volunteer support.

Volunteer to help organizations like the Northwest Wildlife Preservation Society.

Other Interesting Facts

Wolverines have an extremely strong jaw pressure; in fact of all mammals it is second in strength only to the spotted hyena of Africa.

Both a Norwegian and Finnish municipalities have a wolverine on their coat-of-arms.

The wolverine is the largest terrestrial mustelid.

Bibliography

Web Resources:

Hinterland Who's Who website - a good Canadian summary of the entire animal as well as links to other resources

<http://www.hww.ca/hww2.asp?id=108>

The Wolverine Foundation – a Global summary of the animal. Includes a kids page link.

http://www.wolverinefoundation.org/kids/kids_sa.html

Wolverine Myths and Legends – interesting web site with stories, myths and historical references

<http://www.wolverinecom.nf.ca/wolverinemyths.html>

Defenders of Wildlife – how you can help as well as a site you can hear the sound of a Wolverine

http://www.defenders.org/wildlife_and_habitat/wildlife/wolverine.php

Wikipedia – good information and statistics regarding the world wide wolverine range

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wolverine>

Species at Risk public registry – good information regarding population and risk.

http://www.sararegistry.gc.ca/species/speciesDetails_e.cfm?sid=172