



The fisher, once a valuable furbearer in this state, became very rare in the 1930's. Recently, it has again become common and is spreading its range southward. Above, captive fisher at Bear Brook Park

Fisher

“The White Mountain National Forest was once, and may be again the home of one of the largest single concentrations of fisher (*Martes pennanti pennanti*) in the United States.”*

“(They) were once so abundant that they were a nuisance to trappers of the Northern New Hampshire forest, following their lines of

*From Annual Rept. U S. Forest Ser., Laconia, N H., 1942.

sable traps and stealing the captured marten" (Somers 1898). Toward the end of the 19th century they became comparatively scarce Weeks (1888) says they became rare in Coos County after the deer had practically disappeared, and the fisher "could no longer eke out a cold winter upon carcasses of the superannuated old buck, doe, or fawns killed by hunters or the bobcat." Hamilton (1939) notes that they have been known to kill deer

"(The fisher) can catch and kill a hedgehog, and is unaffected by its quills. He kills them by flipping them onto their backs and disembowling them. The late Erwin Palmer saw a fisher kill a hedgehog on the Greenough Trail a few years ago. He also saw them run down and kill squirrels in tree-tops. A marten can catch and kill a squirrel but a fisher can catch and kill a marten" (Hunt 1934).

On the killing of porcupines by fisher, Viron Lowe, formerly a warden with the N. H. Fish and Game Department, writes "The fisher is very fond of hedgehogs and it is no uncommon thing to find where a whole family of hedgehogs has been killed by this vicious little animal. The quills . . . will not work into a fisher as they will into any other animal. Nature has given him two skins so to speak, and one never finds the quills in the flesh but always in between these two skins. I have killed old male fishers with more than fifty quills in them but all were lying flat and between these two skins. There is something about this inner skin, if we may call it that, that either dissolves the point of a quill or turns it" (Cross 1924).*

Cahalane (1947) also describes this habit, and confirms the statement that the quills ordinarily do no harm, although he says that at times they do cause death.

Hamilton (1939) lists porcupine among the preferred food species of the fisher, and states that the quills pass through the alimentary canal without harm. De Vos (1952) reports that fisher are sometimes killed by the quills.

A specimen brought to the N. H. Fish and Game Department in 1950, was full of quills, many being embedded in the throat and intestinal tract. The animal was not killed by them, however, but had been taken accidentally in a trap.

Quoting Seton, Hunt writes that a fisher has been known to kill coons and even the bay lynx, it will fight off a number of dogs when cornered and can jump forty feet from a tree to the ground. De Vos (1952) believed it less arboreal in its habits than generally supposed, and found little evidence that it did much travelling in trees, although able to climb.

Besides porcupine, Hamilton (1939) lists among the food species

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of fisher, mice, squirrels, fox, raccoon and marten. Hare are an important item in their diet.

If fisher sometimes kill bobcats, it appears that bobcats also prey to some extent on the fisher. The New Hampshire Fish and Game Department (1933) reported: "Warden Goodwin sent us a fisher cat that was one of several dug out of a den and killed by a bobcat."

The following observations of fisher tracks, quoted from "Fish and Game Notes" (Hunt 1934), is most interesting and in some respects similar to the observations of de Vos.

"Last week, in a wild and remote section of New Hampshire, we came upon a strange trail. Some animal, with a foot the size of a big fox, had come along in a newly fallen sprinkle of snow, in a series of square-tracked jumps. It was the fresh track of a large fisher, one of the rarest animals in this state.

"We followed it immediately in hopes of learning more about this once famous furbearer. The tracks led through a swampy region onto a patch of ice. The animal kept circling as if always swinging his head and coming into the wind as a hunting mink will do. Every stump and hummock was inspected and when the trail led into thick woods, we found that the fisher, cat-like, walked logs and hopped on tops of rocks and wind-falls. It easily covered a mile in winding and doubling back and exploring, without advancing more than a quarter mile. In one place it had spent considerable time following out some squirrel tracks; in another place, it had hunted unsuccessfully for wood mice. Finally, it was joined by another, even larger fisher, and the two circled out away from each other like greyhounds, only to join again a few hundred yards ahead.

"At last we came to a spot where the ground was tracked up, and here, under a blowdown, we found the frozen half-eaten carcass of a snowshoe rabbit. All of it had been eaten except the hindquarters. The rabbit had evidently been killed for some days and cached. The pair of fishers again continued circling and winding, and after crossing and recrossing one another's tracks several times, met again at another rabbit cache. Here they feasted on a second frozen carcass. A short distance further, on the edge of a swamp, they dug out of the snow a third snowshoe rabbit, and ate some more. They were evidently following a route which was familiar and frequently travelled.

"After tracking around here until it took two or three hours to follow them out, we found where they had headed up into some hardwood hills and started hunting for red squirrels. There were fresh tracks of red squirrels, and a few cottontail tracks, and an occasional partridge track, but here they were unsuccessful. They came into a small clearing and stopped for a moment. The tracks then showed an interesting story

On the edge of the clearing a fox had killed a junco and was apparently devouring it when the fishers came along, and surprised him. The fox left with long, prodigious leaps. The fishers snapped up the junco except for a half-dozen wing feathers, and then struck straight through the woods to a mountain brook where numerous trout had come up to spawn and many had remained. The tracks of the larger fisher showed that he had followed the banks of this frozen brook until he came to a space where the brook was shallow and unfrozen. At one place he had taken a standing jump across and landed easily eight or nine feet away.

"Now it is said that the fisher is misnamed because he is not a fishing animal, as a mink or an otter. The fisher is supposed to be named because he had a habit of stealing the bait from marten traps in the old days when trappers baited their traps and deadfalls with fish. Well, this fisher went into the water and caught a trout and then went up the bank and sat down and ate it. The tracks showed fresh blood on the snow, showing how successful he was." (Cahalane (1947) states that the fisher will go into water, even swim lakes, and will eat fish if somebody else catches them but makes no practice of fishing.)

"Here this fisher was joined by the other, and the two struck through the woods with their square-tracked lope, and finally came out upon the glassy surface of a mountain pond where there was a fine dust of snow. Here the fishers must have played about for hours, at any rate they travelled for miles, around and about. Tracks led out from here in all directions, but after cutting wide circles, we found that the animals had not taken to the woods again. They had played for hours on a large cove that was frozen solid, the main body of the pond was unfrozen. After many hours of working out what seemed a riddle, we finally found where they had gone to the edge of the ice and taken to the water. As it was getting late and we did not have time to circle the pond, we left without picking up the tracks across the lake. There is no question but what they took to water and there are plenty of authorities who have seen them do this."

To Hunt, fisher were a curiosity; to Lowe, who wrote a decade earlier, their ways were familiar and he had, himself, trapped them. "The fisher is the most valuable of all our furbearing animals found in New Hampshire. Their skins bring from fifty to one-hundred-and-fifty dollars, although one-hundred-and-twenty dollars is the most that I ever got for a single skin and this was of a male very dark, sixty-three inches long and a most beautiful skin. The usual price is around eighty-five dollars. They are very easy to trap and I suppose that is the chief reason why they are so scarce. They will walk into any kind of a trap if it is placed so that the snow will not cover it up, and the bait is what they like. They are not very fussy as to bait. One thing about the fisher that

puts him in the outlaw class is that when he finds or kills more meat than he can eat at one time he fouls the rest so that other animals will not touch it. Then he goes to his den in some ledge to sleep, secure in the thought that his next meal is ready for him (Cross 1924) *

There were very few fisher left in New Hampshire in the middle '20's, but around the mountains near Randolph a few were still taken every year.

Hunt (1934) says "In the old days the fisher was abundant over a wide range. He has always been an important furbearer. Records show that from 1821 to 1905, the Hudson's Bay Company bought 377,338 fishers, but after 1905 the numbers were negligible. Like otter and marten, the fisher is rapidly becoming extinct all over North America to say nothing of New Hampshire. There are now known to be a few fishers and marten left in this state, and mighty few. Unless protected they will soon be extinct. The New Hampshire Legislature should declare a permanent closed season on the fisher, sable and marten. When we allow a species to become practically extinct, the least we can do is to try and give it a chance to survive.

Allen (1876) wrote that the fisher was a common inhabitant of the whole of New England. Among the southern New Hampshire towns where its presence at time of settlement is mentioned in local histories are Rindge, Northfield, Manchester, and Weare. Records of catches are entirely absent, but this may not be too significant, since most species less plentiful or less important than beaver — foxes, raccoons, skunks, squirrels, mink and rabbits — received scant attention beyond a bare acknowledgement of their existence. Fisher were probably present in New Hampshire wherever the forest provided suitable habitat, but were probably more numerous in the predominantly spruce-fir forests of the northern part of the state.

De Vos (1952) found the two primary reasons for the decrease of fisher in Ontario to be overtrapping and destruction of the forests, he mentions two contributory causes, both equally applicable to most of New Hampshire — forest fires (including burning to clear land), and clearing for agriculture. The latter was, however, probably of small consequence so far as Coos County the principal habitat of fisher in this state, is concerned.

Fisher were not protected in New Hampshire until after the Civil War, and from this time through 1934 trapping was permitted through approximately half the year.

Fisher were reported by Allen (1904) as present from the White Mountains northward, and in 1908 Dr. C. F. Jackson of the University

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of N. H. saw tracks around the 1st Connecticut Lake. In 1922 Jackson reported them rare in the northern part of the state

Preble (1942) was doubtful that any fisher remained. "A. H. Scott (1927) states that the only family he knew of . . . was on the north end of the Magalloway River"

Shortly after Hunt recommended closing the season, a law was passed to that effect, and there has been no open season on fisher since 1934.

A. H. Currier, then guiding in Pittsburg, told this writer that, although fisher were scarce at the time the legislation was passed, in his opinion they were more plentiful than the Department supposed. He felt that along the international border the law had been of little benefit since trappers continued to take them, sneaking the pelts across the line into Canada, where sale was legal.

An occasional fisher pelt, taken by accident, still appears in the returns of trappers. Numbers taken, and reported, in New Hampshire since 1928 are shown in Table XIII

TABLE XIII
Fisher Included in Trappers Reports 1928-1953*

<i>Year</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>No.</i>
1928	8	1935	2	1942	0	1949	0
1929	7	1936	0	1943	1	1950	1
1930	10	1937	0	1944	1	1951	0
1931	11	1938	0	1945	2	1952	0
1932	9	1939	0	1946	2	1953	3
1933	8	1940	0	1947	3	1954	0
1934	16	1941	1	1948	0	1955	1

*Since 1934, taken illegally or by accident.

According to Joe Piper, U. S. Forest Ranger at the White Mountain National Forest, fisher were very plentiful in the Waterville Valley in 1937. Within four years they were much less common there, having nearly exterminated the grouse and rabbits in the immediate vicinity. Piper states that, wherever fisher become plentiful, their voracious feeding habits soon result in a food shortage, and the fisher enlarge their range or move on to more abundant supplies.

This habit is reflected in the apparently conflicting opinions on the present status of fisher. Reliable observers in one section may report that fisher are too numerous, while equally reliable reports from areas not too far distant state that they have passed their peak and are on the down grade.

For example, Sam Bailey of Colebrook, who has trapped that region for most of his 86 years up to 1951, believes that there were fewer fisher in that area in 1953 than there were 5 or 6 years earlier. This he at-

tributed to their having retired further into the mountains when disturbed by lumbering operations.

Willard Adams of Albany observed a fisher in the Passaconaway Valley in 1949, and saw another chasing a hare during the deer season of 1950. In the early spring of 1953 he saw a third in the same vicinity. In 1952 a young male fisher was released near Passaconaway by Conservation Officer William D. Beal. It was one of a pair taken from a den in Freedom, and raised in captivity at Camp Calumet. The female was killed by the male.

Piper states that in 1953 fisher tracks were seen all over Dolly Copp, and they had become so common that they competed with lynx which had become scarce. He believes that fisher are more than a little to blame for the scarcity of marten, and that there should be an open season once in five years or so for the protection of marten and other small animals. The fisher will adapt itself to a wide variety of conditions, and Piper claimed they were now all out of their regular range, and all over the state.

Kearsarge Mountain, in Merrimack County, is far south of the ordinary habitat of fisher, and it is not known that any had been present there since Colonial days until 1951. On that date one was accidentally taken in a trap, and there have been subsequent reports of sightings in nearby towns. They have been reported from Webster and Boscawen, and, in the spring of 1955, one was seen in Hopkinton by W. T. Silver, of the Fish and Game Department.

In 1953 Maine reported fisher becoming relatively common in a number of towns bordering on New Hampshire. At that time they were not generally considered common in this state, but were more frequently seen in the regions north of Winnepesaukee, particularly at the lower altitudes, and woodsmen and conservation officers believed they had made substantial gains. Affected range included not only the eastern border of the state, but all Coos County to the Connecticut River. They were more plentiful in the White Mountain Forest than elsewhere.

Henry Laramie, biologist with the Management and Research Division of the Department, believed that fisher reached their peak along the eastern border about that time, and two years later, as this is written, are less numerous there. Two fisher were observed in Effingham in September of 1954 by biologists Forrest Fogg and Carl Lacaille. In 1955, two were killed in the Farmington-Middleton area.

Conservation Officer George Hamilton, whose territory covers southeastern Coos County, including the Passaconaway region, told this writer in the spring of 1955, that fisher were now so numerous in the White Mountain Forest as to be a menace to small game.