Fishers in The Forest

A SECRETIVE ANIMAL RETURNS TO PENNSYLVANIA'S DEEP WOODS

By Mike Sajna

And then there was nothing. Maybe a solitary hunter or a couple of wood hicks, as Pennsylvania lumbermen were once known, caught a fleeting glimpse of the last fisher in Pennsylvania. But that is pure conjecture, a bit of romanticism. Except in the rarest of instances, such as the passenger pigeon—the last one of which crossed the line into oblivion at the Cincinnati Zoo on Aug. 29, 1914—the extinction of an animal species is a lonely affair.

Reintroduction, on the other hand, is an event. One year ago, on December 16, 1994, more than three dozen observers gathered in the Fish Dam Wild Area of Clinton County's Sproul State Forest to witness the official return of the fisher (*Martes pennanti*) to Pennsylvania. It was an appropriately impressive crowd, comprised of members of the Game Commission and Bureau of Forestry, biologists, representatives of various sportsmen's organizations, newspaper reporters, and the local television cameraman.

A fisher is a fox-sized member of the weasel family. According to a study of extinct and rare Pennsylvania mammals in the April 1985 *Annals of Carnegie Museum*, the last fisher taken in Pennsylvania, in 1923, came from the mountains above Milroy in Mifflin County. But it was most likely a stray from New York. For all practical purposes, the fisher, a mammal that appears in the fossil record of the state, was gone from Pennsylvania by the mid-1890s, a victim of clear-cutting its forest habitat and of unregulated trapping.

But as they waited in their plastic tubes at their reintroduction in 1994, our six fishers were not concerned with the fate of their ancestors, nor with the crowd's desire to see them. One after another the doors to the tubes were removed and a dark brown shape wearing a radio collar bounced once across five feet of open snow, then vanished into the dark, hemlock woods, leaving the VIP welcoming committee with barely a fleeting glance.

The release of the fisher is the most recent in a series of reintroductions to Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Ohio, of extinct or rare mammals native to the tri-state region. The goal of each program is to reestablish portions of the region's natural heritage and increase its biodiversity.

"I think it is an important part of the commonwealth's agenda to restore species that have been extirpated from Pennsylvania, if the habitat will support and if the people will support it," says Calvin DuBrock, director of the Game Commission's Bureau of Wildlife Management. "We are not necessarily going to restore all extirpated fauna. You may not see wolves running around and mountain lions, but restoring species is an important part of our plans."

Of course, species reintroduction is nothing new. Beaver, elk, eagles, and—as incredible as it sounds today when 40,000 annually are killed along the state's highways—even the white-tailed deer, are all native species that are or once were extinct in Pennsylvania and have been brought back through stocking efforts.

The reintroduction of the fisher to the Upper Ohio River watershed started in 1969, when West Virginia released 23 fishers in the Canaan Mountain and Cranberry Glades areas of Monongahela National Forest. The Cranberry Glades stocking failed, but the Canaan Mountain release succeeded. According to Jack Cromer, supervisor of Game Management Services for the Division of Natural Resources in Elkins, W.Va., fishers have been reported on Canaan Mountain every year since 1969 and there is evidence the population has spread into western Maryland.

Pennsylvania's current mammal reintroduction program was launched in 1983 with the river otter (*Lutra canadensis*). Once a common resident of the state's waterways, the otter had been reduced by the 1950s to a small remnant population in the Pocono region, a victim of deforestation, industrial pollution and unregulated trapping.

After strong environmental laws enacted in the 1960s and 1970s cleaned up the state's rivers, the possibility arose of returning the otter to other waterways around Pennsylvania. Researchers at East Stroudsberg University began gathering data on otter feeding patterns and habitat requirements in the Poconos, and developed new capturing and handling techniques.

Armed with the data produced by the East Stroudsberg team, the Game Commission and Wild Resources Conservation Fund contributed funds and other resources to the project, using support from the check-off block on state income tax forms. In 1983, a total of 39 otters were released in north central Pennsylvania, the majority along Pine Creek in the "Grand Canyon of Pennsylvania."

After eight years of subsequent study convinced biologists that the releases in north central Pennsylvania had resulted in the establishment of new otter populations, the Game Commission, Wildlife Resources Conservation Fund, Allegheny National Forest and Penn State University joined forces to expand the program. Their goal was to establish self-sustaining populations throughout the state so that any unforeseen environmental problems in one area would not eliminate the otter entirely.

Since the Poconos probably could not provide enough otters to support a large-scale reintroduction effort, additional otters were purchased from trappers in New York's Adirondack Mountains. In June 1990, the first group was released in Tionesta Creek, Forest County. That stocking was followed by a second release in Tionesta Creek in April 1991 and a third in the Youghiogheny River in Ohiopyle State Park in April 1992.

Altogether, the Game Commission and Wild Resources Conservation Fund have spent about $250,000 to extend the otter's distribution in Pennsylvania. According to Tom Serfass, a Penn State University biologist and coordinator of both the otter and fisher projects, the releases have proven very successful. He says Pennsylvania is the first state to document the fact that its reintroduced river otter population has reproduced.

West Virginia started its otter reintroduction program in 1984, when it released animals into the Little Kanawha, West Fork, Elk, Greenbrier and Meadow rivers. According to the DNR's Cromer, the otters have done well in the Meadow, Elk and Little Kanawha rivers. He says plans are in the works to stock another 100 animals in those waterways, which will be the final stage of West Virginia's otter reintroduction program.

The Ohio Department of Environmental Resources began releasing otters at four locations around that state in 1990. Among those sites was the Grand River in Trumbull and Ashtabula counties in the far northeastern corner of the state. How well the otter has done in Ohio is as yet uncertain, according to Dennis Case, a wildlife biologist with the DNR. However, numerous reports of tracks and of females with young have been received, and one Ohio otter has shown up in Pennsylvania at Shenango Reservoir in Mercer County.

Inset photos by Leonard Rue

ENVIRONMENTALLY PROTECTED AND CLEANER PENNSYLVANIA FORESTS HAVE LED

Preparing a fisher for radio-tracking.

Encouraged by the success of the otter program, Serfass, with support from the Game Commission, Wild Resources Conservation Fund and the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, conducted a feasibility study on the reintroduction of the fisher. Serfass says the study showed there was "a very strong possibility that some of the circumstances that caused the fisher to decline in Pennsylvania had been remedied," meaning mainly that trapping is now closely regulated and the clear-cut forests have grown into mature woodlands.

"We were concerned not only that we would have forested habitat for the fisher, but that we would have forested habitat in perpetuity," Serfass says. That was ensured by the presence of a vast expanse of national forest, state forest, state gamelands and state parks stretching across northern Pennsylvania from Warren County through Sullivan County.

Regenerated tornado areas, of which there are several in the region, were looked upon as particularly good habitat for the fisher, since they hold large populations of voles, deer mice, chipmunks and flying squirrels on which fishers feed. Large annual deer harvests in those areas also means plenty of "gut piles" left by hunters after they have field dressed their deer, another favorite fisher food.

Still, as Duane Schlitter, curator of mammals at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History points out, nobody knows exactly what effect the reintroduction of a formerly extinct species to an area might have upon the ecology of that area.

"There should be some very frank consideration of the biological impact of these reintroductions over and above the romantic idealism that fishers were here and wouldn't it be nice to reintroduce them," Schlitter says. "There were a lot of things here, but conditions are not the same as they were 200 years ago. While sitting on your back porch in various counties in Pennsylvania and listening to wolves howling at the moon may sound romantic, it is just not possible from a practical standpoint."

Schlitter says biologists working on reintroduction programs especially need to consider the impact the return of a formerly extinct species might have upon wildlife already in an area. One problem is that some species, like the fisher, have been gone so long that the instinctive behavior of the creatures they prey upon has been lost, which means those species could be adversely affected. A decline in the numbers of game animals or fish in an area where a species has been released could raise the ire of sportsmen, who to a large degree pay the bill for such programs. Then, too, there is the worry of possibly spreading disease.

"You have to look at it from the standpoint of what is fair to the animal, not from the view of what is romantic and aesthetically pleasing to humans," says Schlitter.

About the fisher's possible impact on wildlife, Serfass says its diverse eating habits should keep it from zeroing in on any particular species. Studies conducted in New Hampshire show the diet of the fisher in that state consists of: snowshoe hares, 4 percent; shrews, 6 percent; squirrels, 10 percent; mice, 10 percent; voles, 17 percent; birds, 8 percent; vegetation, 11 percent; carrion, 17 percent; trap bait and carrion, 16 percent.

Serfass feels, too, that wildlife populations will be protected by the fact that the fisher has a slower metabolism than most members of the weasel family and so eats less often. He says the average fisher can survive on about a pound of deer carrion or one squirrel per day, and one large porcupine might feed a small fisher for a month.

Spread of the fisher from the remote forests of north central Pennsylvania into populated areas where they might become a nuisance is highly doubtful, according to Serfass. Fishers are secretive creatures of the deep woods and don't often cross open areas, which is why since 1969 West Virginia's fishers have barely made it into western Maryland. Serfass says the animal's solitary nature means Pennsylvania will be fortunate if it can sustain a population of 100 fishers in 50,000 acres of forest. He does not expect fishers ever to be common south of Interstate 80 or north of Route 6.

The fisher reintroduction project is expected to continue through 1996. Thus far, 45 fishers have been released, and two mortalities have been documented—one was accidentally caught in a trap, and the second was hit by a car. Radio trackings have shown considerable move-

TO THE REINTRODUCTION OF BOTH THE RIVER OTTER AND THE FISHER.

ment among the released animals. Originally released in Clinton County, the fishers have been sighted or tracked into the forests of neighboring Potter, Lycoming and Tioga counties.

Pleased with their progress thus far, Serfass and his assistants are now preparing for a second year of releases, during which they expect to handle an additional 60 to 90 fishers, obtained from trappers in New York's Adirondack Mountains and New Hampshire's White Mountains. The total cost is estimated to be about $145,000.

Support for the fisher reintroduction has been expressed by a variety of conservation and sportsmen's groups, including the Wild Turkey Federation, the Pennsylvania Trappers Association, the Audubon Society of Western Pennsylvania, the Nature Conservancy and Mosquito Creek Sportsmen's Association. Don Clemner, president of the Unified Sportsmen, which claims a membership of 90,000 statewide, says his group is "very supportive of the fisher."

Clemner says the Unified Sportsmen favor the program because the fisher is a furbearer that its members some day may be permitted to trap, and because it is one of the few predators that feeds on porcupines, which have become a problem in northern Pennsylvania. One letter from a camp owner praising the release tells of porcupines causing $4,000 worth of damage to his camp. They ate nine of 13 beams in his cabin, the kitchen cabinets, aluminum gutters, the plastic gutters he replaced them with, the steel sheeting he put around the cabin to keep them out, and the outhouse addition.

Concerns voiced during the otter reintroduction centered around their eating game fish such as trout. That resistance dissolved, however, when anglers were shown studies on the otter's food habits that revealed their main diet to consist of crayfish and rough fish like suckers and minnows. According to Serfass, 500 fishermen were surveyed about the otter and 90 percent of them gave favorable responses.

"In a lot of cases you hear the negative comments because they are often the most visible and often the loudest," he says. "We were actually surprised at how broad-based the support was."

To ensure that the fishers and otters involved in the reintroduction programs are free of disease, they are quarantined at Penn State and examined by a veterinarian. To give each animal the best chance of survival, they also are fattened up so that they are in peak condition when released.

If everything goes well with the fisher, Serfass says he would next like to consider reintroducing the another member of the weasel family, the marten (*Martes americana*), which has been absent from Pennsylvania since 1901.

While reintroduction projects have brought the otter and fisher back to the tri-state region, they are not meant to be the long-term solution to wildlife diversity, Serfass points out. "The long-term answer is keeping the environment clean and not letting the animals become extinct." ■

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