

# Return of



photos by author

**FREE AT LAST!** A released fisher dashes from its holding tube.

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*A new reintroduction project holds the exciting prospect of restoring a long-lost mammal to the vast forests of northcentral Pennsylvania.*

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**CLINTON** County WCO John Wasserman (kneeling) and Northcentral Region Director Willis Sneath release one of the first fishers into Pennsylvania.

# the Fisher

**T**HE FISHERS didn't waste much time once the lids on their PVC pipe holding tubes were slid open. Most of them bolted from the pipes, taking only a couple bounds to cross the 15 or so feet between them and the rugged, log-strewn hollow into which they were being released.

None of them stopped to look back at the crowd of 50 or more people who'd come to witness this historic event. The fisher, a member of the mustelid or weasel family, was returning to Pennsylvania for the first time in nearly a century.

Fishers disappeared from our landscape when the state's vast forest was cut in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The fisher's valuable fur also caused it to become a target of many trappers, and unregulated trapping contributed to the animal's disappearance.

In an effort to restore a beautiful part of Pennsylvania's natural heritage, the Game Commission and Penn State University have begun a cooperative venture to reintroduce this native predator.

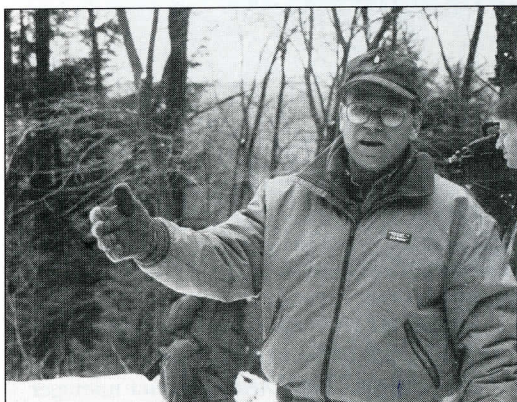
The Commission, with financial assistance from the Wild Resource Conservation Fund and the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, is funding the program.

Heading the project will be Dr. Thomas L. Serfass and Denise H. Mitcheltree of Penn State's School of Forest Resources, along with fellow PSU staffers Robert P. Brooks and Walter M. Tzilkowski.

As an undergraduate, Mitcheltree conducted much of the work on the feasibility study that indicated fishers could be reintroduced here, as they have been in West Virginia and southeastern New York.

The study found that one of the biggest factors affecting the chances of success is forest composition. Modern forestry practices implemented by both governmental and private forest owners have returned large expanses of woodland — which fishers prefer — to Pennsylvania. In examining possible reintroduction sites, researchers also looked for areas that had an adequate prey base and low human density.

Because the forest composition of public land is least likely to change due to development or extensive timbering, the large maturing forests of the Northcentral — much of which is public — seemed the logical place to begin.



**DR. TOM SERFASS, who spearheaded the successful otter reintroduction, leads the fisher project.**

**By J. Scott Rupp**



The initial release of six fishers was conducted Dec. 19 on the Fish Dam Wild Area of the Sproul State Forest near Renovo.

Robert F. Davey, Jr., of the Dept. of Environmental Resources' Bureau of Forestry said the fisher reintroduction was another example of efforts to focus on a broader view of the natural world.

"We're starting to manage the forest as an ecosystem, and wildlife is an integral part of that system. If

the Commission's Bureau of Wildlife Management.

Fishers are fairly large, with females averaging five to six pounds, males nine to 10. They resemble big weasels, although their bodies are stockier and their muzzle is more pronounced and elongated. At a distance, the long fur of the fisher appears black, but closer inspection reveals tri-colored guard hairs surrounding the face and shoulders.

Dr. Serfass — whose name may be familiar to *Game News* readers from his work on the successful reintroduction of river otters, another mustelid — terms the fisher a "generalist carnivore." Studies of the fisher's diet (which, ironically, does not include fish) show that to be true: It eats food as diverse as deer carrion; plants; birds, both small and not so small; squirrels, chipmunks and other rodents; and porcupines.

The inclusion of that last animal is noteworthy. The fisher is one of the few animals that successfully and regularly preys on porcupines. In fact, some states have brought back the fisher in order to control porcupines, which are often blamed for destroying everything from timber and cabins to aluminum siding and car tires.

Fishers prefer habitats dominated by continuous woodland, both coniferous and mixed forest. They will forage in regenerating clearcuts and burns, but Serfass says fishers prefer a canopy above their heads. Optimal winter habitat is comprised of dense, mature forest stands with understories dominated by dense vegetation, fallen logs and other such cover.

The Fish Dam release site, recommended by Clinton County WCO John Wasserman, provides these habitat requirements.

A tornado-ravaged area on the top of the ridge — although devoid of trees — furnishes a ready supply of small mammals for the fishers. Some of the area had burned several years ago, and that too should help provide a prey base.



**GRADUATE student Denise Mitcheltree will be conducting much of the telemetry work.**

we're to live in harmony with the land, we need a diversity of species," said Davey, district manager for Sproul.

Thanks to Davey and his people, there were plenty of helping hands and 4-wheel-drive trucks to assist with the release.

From the Game Commission's point of view, returning fishers to the wild is an essential part of its mission.

"We're not going to restore every extirpated species [animals that have disappeared from historic territories], but reintroductions are an important part of managing wildlife," said Cal DuBrock, director of

But most of the area is comprised of mature forest. The hollow into which the animals were released is rugged country, with plenty of deadfalls and understory for fishers and their prey. One sportsman who hunts the area says the terrain is so rough it's nearly impossible to drag out a deer.

With an array of cover types available to the fishers, Serfass is anxious to see where the animals set up their territories.

"This will give us a chance, through radio telemetry tracking, to see what these animals will do. We hope they'll stay in this area, but they may range as far as 10 miles from the release site," Serfass says.

Of the six fishers in the first release, five had been fitted with radio telemetry collars so researchers could track the animals' movements. One day after the release, the research team located all five. They'd moved up to a mile and a half away.

Fishers are excellent tree climbers, and their hunting style is one of constant searching along the ground and prowling tree branches. That hunting method makes them easy to trap.

Fishers are being obtained from New York and New Hampshire; the latter state is offering its trappers money for every live fisher in good condition that they bring in, \$100 for males and \$150 for females.

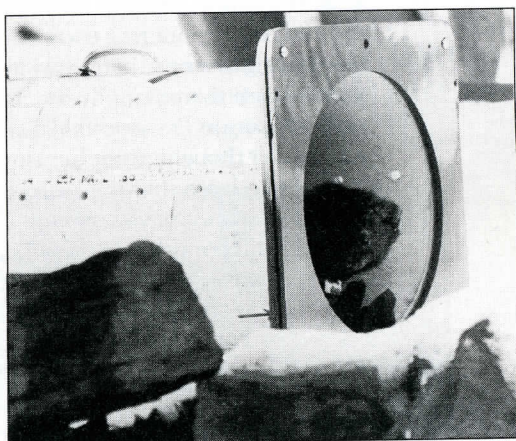
Fishers primarily choose trees in which to den, although they'll make use of rock crevices, too. They are solitary animals, and their population densities will likely be quite low — probably less than one per square mile of forest.

"They're rare even where they're doing well," Serfass says.

Many wildlife enthusiasts are excited about the prospect of seeing fishers in the woods, or at least knowing they're there. Few are worried that the fisher will harm game or nongame wildlife populations, and in an introductory briefing held before the release, Serfass read a sampling of letters of support he'd received for the project.

Groups such as the National Wild Turkey Federation, Unified Sportsmen of Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Trappers Association are in favor of the effort, as are the Nature Conservancy and the Audubon Society.

Fisher releases will be conducted for two years. Twenty to 30 animals will be stocked at three to five distinct sites. Serfass hopes to stock the animals at a 1:1 sex ratio, but he says that will depend on what ani-



**A FEMALE fisher cautiously surveys her new surroundings before departing the tube.**

mals he's able to get. Mitcheltree notes that, in the early stages of the project at least, the animals were arriving at a rapid clip.

Serfass says it's likely the females that are released this winter are pregnant, and it's possible each will give birth to two to three young in the spring.

Fishers will be reintroduced from Forest to Sullivan counties — north of Interstate 80 and south of Route 6, where Serfass believes they will fare best. Several releases were conducted in early winter; more are planned for spring. □