

ENVIRONMENT

More on larger-than-life fishers

In an earlier article, I wrote about some of the myths surrounding fishers, their behaviour and their habits. These small members of the weasel family definitely have a reputation that's larger-than-life. From the stories that are told about them, you would think that they are much bigger than their average of 10 to 15 pounds.

Fishers are solitary by nature and are very effective hunters. Their principal foods are rabbits, mice and other small mammals. They are one of the only predators that will hunt porcupine. To avoid getting covered with quills, fishers flip the porcupines over and attack their belly, which is one of the porcupine's only vulnerable areas.

Fishers mate once a year in the early spring. On average three kits are born in March or April. For the first eight to ten weeks of life, the kits stay in the den, which is normally located in a hollow tree. The young stay with their mothers until the late summer or early fall and then it's time to find their own hunting territory.

The favourite habitat of fishers is a large forested area with a variety of trees. This provides them with good cover for hunting, food sources and den trees.

not only in the fisher population, but in their range.

One of the other factors which may contribute to the fisher population increase is climate change. Because of their short legs and small feet, fishers have a difficult time getting around in deep snow. Studies of snow depth and fisher populations have shown that where snow depth has declined, fisher populations have increased.

At a presentation on fishers in March at the Outdoor Centre, Little Cataraqui Creek Conservation Area, MNR Wildlife Biologist Jeff Bowman presented most of the material I have used as the basis for this article. He also presented research findings from various studies. One of these studies was to determine the territories or ranges of individual fishers. This was done using radio collars.

The ranges varied from 3.6 square km in the Kemptville area to almost 30 square km in the Algonquin Park area. The size of the range depends on the quality of the habitat and the amount of food available. A smaller number indicates a higher quality habitat. These ranges would normally be the territory of only one fisher. Fishers do not allow other fishers within their territory except during mating season.

If you happen to see a fisher, consider yourself lucky. Fisher sightings are not very common and they normally run away from humans very quickly.

Karla Maki-Esdon is the communications coordinator for the Cataraqui Region Conservation Authority. She can be reached by phone at (613) 546-4228 ext. 226 or by e-mail at kmakiesd@cataraqueregion.on.ca.



Karla Maki-Esdon
THE GREAT OUTDOORS

In areas of Ontario where the amount of forest cover has increased, the fisher population has had a corresponding increase. In fact, one of the main reasons for the comeback of the fisher has been improved habitat.

In the early part of the 20th century, logging, farming practices, predator control such as poisoning and over-harvesting of fishers for their fur all contributed to a drastic decline in the fisher population. In the 1950s, the only part of southern Ontario that had a fisher population was Algonquin Park.

Tree planting programs, changes to agricultural practices and more stringent trapping regulations have all helped to create a suitable environment for the fisher population to increase. In 1995 there was a significant increase



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