

## Meet the Fisher: *Martes pennanti*

By Martha Sheldon

Have you ever spotted a fisher? It seems that increasing numbers of these shy and elusive animals have been seen in our watershed. I've seen 3, one near the GHP boat ramp! And what is a fisher, exactly?

The fisher is a reclusive, solitary predator, seldom seen even when numerous. It is found throughout Massachusetts, except on Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket. As a member of the weasel family, the fisher is a keenly adapted predator that has been very successful; by studying them we gain a better understanding of the ecology and behavior of predator and prey species.



### Description

The fisher is a member of the weasel family, the *Mustelidae*—which include mink, otter, short-tailed weasel, and marten. Though often called “fisher cats”, that is a misnomer; they are unrelated to cats.

It is built like a stocky weasel with a long slender body, useful for investigating hollow logs. They are agile in trees, like their cousins the martens. Their eyes are placed facing forward, and have a pale green eye shine. Adult males weigh 8-16 pounds, and are twice as heavy as adult females. The coat color appears almost uniformly black from a distance, especially against snow, but it actually ranges from deep brown to black, with light hairs around the face and shoulders. Fisher have 5 toes, and walk on the whole foot like a bear. The gait is bounding, like many small to medium mammals.



*Typical fisher track. Photo by M. Sheldon*

Bounding is energetically expensive and in snowy areas the fisher may choose to forage in areas of shallow snow coverage where bounding is less expensive. A typical fisher track pattern shows one foot slightly in front of the other, and the back feet fall into the prints left by the front feet. Check out this video of a fisher taken by HPWA member Phil Angell. Click to view:

<https://streamable.com/n9xci>

### Life Cycle

Fisher give birth most commonly in March and April. Females produce 1 litter each year with an average litter size of 3 kits. Dens used to raise young fishers are high up in hollow trees; they are used for the first 8-10 weeks. By five months of age, the kits are about the same size as the adult female and have begun to kill their own prey. In the fall, the young disperse and lead largely solitary lives as adults. Fishers can become prey themselves, and are sometimes killed by coyotes, dogs, eagles, horned owls and cars.

### Food and Habits

Fisher are generalized predators. They eat any animal they can catch and overpower, and they readily eat carrion. Fishers are omnivorous and in our area eat mice, shrews, voles, squirrels, rabbits, birds, and fruit. (In northern N.E., fisher eat porcupines and snowshoe hares. They are uniquely adapted to killing

porcupines.) Jays and ruffed grouse are winter birds that are commonly eaten. Apples are often eaten by fisher in New England, where trees from abandoned farms still exist. In suburban areas, problems with fisher can sometimes arise, usually restricted to free-ranging cats or chickens. Fisher can be active day or night, and do not hibernate in winter. They commonly use hollow logs, tree cavities, and brush piles to rest.

### Rebounding Populations...

Fishers have evolved to survive the climate of North America, can travel long distances in short periods of time and can hunt a wide variety of prey animals. In the past trapping and logging were the two most important factors influencing fisher populations. (In Massachusetts, fishers are classified as a furbearer species, for which a regulated trapping season and management program have been established.) **Dave Wattles**, MA Division of Fisheries & Wildlife emailed his comments to me about fisher in our area. “You are correct fisher have increased in numbers in the southeast in recent years. One of the ways we can track that is through our trapping information. It was the mid-2000s when we first started seeing fisher trapped in your area. We now see that eastern MA has by far the highest sighting rates in the state, 2-3 times as high as what we see in far more forested areas of the state. We believe the great increase in population is the fisher reoccupying previously unoccupied habitat. But we also believe that the fisher population is being strongly supplemented by people. All the bird feeders in eastern MA are supplementing fisher’s natural prey base of birds and small mammals. So backyards become great hunting areas for fisher, particularly when they are surrounded by forest.”

If any of you reading this have your own story or photo of a fisher, and would like to share it in the HPWA newsletter or FB page, you can email me [martha.sheldon205@gmail.com](mailto:martha.sheldon205@gmail.com) or [lee@theherringpondswatershed.org](mailto:lee@theherringpondswatershed.org).