

The Fisher and Private Land

The fisher (*Martes pennanti*) is a member of the weasel family that is seldom seen in the wild, but is an important part of British Columbia's carnivore community. The fisher is blue-listed (threatened) in this province, largely due to the effects of habitat loss. Despite its name, fishers do not fish and depend on forests for all their life history needs. While private land forms only a small portion of the forested area in BC, the most desirable land is usually in valley bottoms that grow the largest trees. Some of these large trees provide habitat for fishers to reproduce and landowners can help protect some of these trees for fisher habitat.



Description: The Fisher is one of the largest members of the Mustelid family with a body sized between that of a marten and a wolverine. The species is sexually dimorphic, meaning that the sexes differ in body size. Females weight 2 – 3 Kg and are approximately 90 cm in length. Males are roughly twice the size of females at 4 – 6 Kg and 120 cm in length.

The animals have the long slender body shape typical of the weasel family with rounded ears that are set close to the head. It is well adapted for climbing with five sharp retractable claws. Its fur ranges from a rich brown to black, with grizzled lighter coloured hair on its head and

shoulders. Some fishers also have patches of white on their chest and undersides.



In BC, Fishers are found at in forested habitats at mid-elevations generally north of Kamloops and on the inside of the coast mountains. Locations around streams, wetlands, and lakes are often important fisher habitats.

Fisher prey on any small animals they can catch. In BC, this includes mice, squirrels, snowshoe hare, and birds.



Fisher kits are born in late March to early April in cavities found in large diameter trees. Females are very selective about the trees they use for reproductive dens. The tree cavity always has an entrance hole that is approximately 8 – 12 cm in diameter, likely to keep larger predators away from their young. The den tree will have trees and shrubs around it that help the female approach her den unseen. Females usually use more than one den tree as the kits grow in size.

Females have 2-3 kits on average and the young will stay with their mother until the following fall, but it can take up to 2 years for the kits to establish a home range of their own.

Young fishers have a tough time making it through the first year of their life with a survival rate of only 20%. Ensuring that there are sufficient numbers of potential den trees will give them the best start possible.

Fisher are the largest obligate cavity tree user in BC and by saving trees for fisher you will also be saving trees for other wildlife species in BC that use large trees. It is estimated that 90 species of wildlife use large trees for denning, nests, and roosting.

These species include primary excavators like woodpeckers, sapsuckers, nuthatches, and chickadees that can create their own holes in trees. Secondary cavity users include owls, squirrels, salamanders, bats, and marten. Large trees also provide locations for large nests. Birds like eagles, ospreys, hawks, and herons construct platform nests in large trees.

Large old trees are often felled for as a source of firewood. However, good den trees rarely make for good firewood due to the rot present in the tree. Woodcutters often leave large sections of trees with rot lying on the ground.





In BC, fisher have reproductive dens in black cottonwood, trembling aspen, balsam poplar, Douglas-fir, and lodgepole pine trees. Trees used by fisher are large for the tree species taking 100s of years to grow and develop the large internal cavities fishers need.

Good den trees have advanced decay and, because of this, many potential den trees are cut down by landowners, due to the hazards to people and buildings. You can help by assessing trees on your property for potential wildlife use and planning development to preserve those trees for fishers and other wildlife.



Den trees can be assessed based on their diameter, the presence of rot, and access holes. Cottonwood trees used as dens (top left) are generally > 90 cm diameter. Fisher dens in Douglas-fir trees (above) are usually in trees > 65 cm diameter. Balsam poplar trees (left) used by fishers for dens have diameters > 60 cm.



Trembling aspen den trees (left) are usually > 45 cm diameter. Lodgepole pine trees (below) used by fishers for dens are generally > 35 cm diameter.

Of course, we know that all trees eventually fall over with time. Trees with smaller diameters than quoted above may eventually become wildlife trees, especially if they exhibit signs of decay. Saving some smaller trees for recruitment will ensure a supply of wildlife trees over time.



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For more information on fishers and fisher habitat visit:
fisher.forrex.org



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