



Fisher Reintroduction

OLYMPIC NATIONAL PARK

Importance

The fisher (*Martes pennanti*) is a dark, sleek, cat-sized member of the weasel family that once roamed coniferous forests throughout western Washington, including Olympic National Park (OLYM). Because of their prized fur, their susceptibility to trapping, and loss and fragmentation of their preferred low-elevation coniferous forest habitats, fisher populations declined and eventually were extirpated throughout Washington during the mid to late 20th century. Nobody knows when the last fisher disappeared from OLYM, although the last fisher was trapped near the park in 1969.

Any ecosystem is incomplete without all its parts. Because the purpose of national parks is to preserve and protect vignettes of primitive America for future generations, the missing pieces are acutely missed. Consequently, an important goal of the National Park Service (NPS) is to reintroduce extirpated species to their native environments where feasible, and in so doing restore the richness of native plant and animal communities, and the diversity of natural processes that govern how park ecosystems work.

In 2006, NPS and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) forged a partnership with several other agencies and conservation groups to return the fisher to its native habitat in OLYM. After lengthy planning and amidst a fresh snow on a cold January morning in 2008, the partners gathered to release the first of 11 fishers transported from British Columbia to their new home in the Park. This marked the first step in restoring a key player to the Park—the fisher—long known for its affinity for large trees, its secretive habits, and as a predator of small and medium-sized forest mammals

Status

Biologists released 90 fishers in seven of the 11 major watersheds that drain the mountainous interior of OLYM. All released fishers had tiny radio collars, and allowed biologists from the NPS, US Geological Survey, WDFW and other agencies to track their movements and fate for up to 2½ years following their release. That work wrapped up in 2011 when the last radio collar reached the end of its battery life. Data from that research are currently being analyzed; consequently results are in most cases too preliminary to draw conclusions.



We know, however, that fishers released into OLYM have dispersed long distances—up to 99 kilometers (about 60 miles) to establish home ranges widely throughout the Park and on adjoining lands. In May 2009 biologists documented the first litter of young fishers (known as kits) that were conceived and born to one of the first fishers released in 2008. By June 2011 seven females were documented to have denned. This provides confirmation that at least several fishers have adapted to their new home by finding a suitable den sites and mates. Because all radio collars have run out of battery power, and transplanted fishers have successfully reproduced, biologists no longer know the exact number of fishers in the reintroduced population.

Discussion

The return of fishers to OLYM is an ‘adaptive management’ project, a marriage between research and management designed to inform future management. We know that many of the released fishers survived for over two years and that several produced kits. The next phase of the study is to assess if the population is persisting and spreading. We hope to do this through the use of remotely triggered cameras that “trap” images of fishers as they come into bait and boxes that grab samples of hair so that we can do DNA analysis and assess who survived and who reproduced. We hope to start that investigation in 2013. Ultimately that information will be used determine whether the fisher restoration project was a success, and how much of their new landscape fishers are using.

This landmark effort culminates over ten years of interagency and non-governmental cooperation. Key funding and support has been provided by US Geological Survey, OLYM, WDFW, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Conservation Northwest, Doris Duke Foundation, and Washington’s National Park Fund. This project also benefits from the support and efforts of many individuals within the US Forest Service, British Columbia Ministry of Environment, Makah Tribe, Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe, British Columbia Trappers Association, Washington Department of Natural Resources, and the University of Washington.

Opposite Female 65 leaving her den tree, captured by a motion-activated camera. Olympic Fisher Project

Above Fisher kits rescued from a den tree after the mother died. The kits were raised at Northwest Trek and released when fully grown. Olympic Fisher Project/ Manson

Contacts: Patti_Happe@nps.gov
Kurt_Jenkins@usgs.gov