

SEQUOIA NATURE GUIDE SERVICE

IS THE WOLVERINE WORTH WHILE

The Sierra Nevada Wolverine (*Gulo luscus*) is making his last stand. The animal is found in the High Sierras between 6,500 and 13,000 feet and is making a losing fight. Man is a natural enemy who seeks to kill the wolverine at every opportunity; while the porcupine when captured as food by the wolverine proves a fatal meal, his sharp quills puncturing the wolverine's intestines and causing painful death within 7 to 10 days.

Range of the Wolverine

Wolverine formerly ranged in the forests of the colder parts of North America from the northern limit of timber line south to New England and New York; in the Rocky Mountains south to Colorado, and along the Sierra Nevada Mountains to Mt. Whitney and Sequoia National Park, California. The inroad of settlement, the persistent hunting and trapping of the animal for its beautiful fur, the enmity the animal has gained by reason of its bad morals, as well as his taste for porcupine, has resulted in the animals becoming extinct over the greater portion of their former range. Where still found they are few and scattered.

The last stand of the wolverine is in the western part of their range, and here they are becoming very rare. They are most abundant in the vicinity of Mt. Whitney and Sequoia National Park. This fact is, perhaps, due to the ruggedness of the country, the protection afforded by the National Park Service and the scarcity of porcupine. Many of the animals have been killed in recent years near the park and were, no doubt, products of the park. The last capture was at Mineral King during the winter of 1921,22. Three animals were taken, in excellent condition and fine specimens, the largest weighing about 135 pounds. This catch practically wiped out the species in the Mineral King District for the tracks of but one animal have since been observed in that district. One of these skins is now on exhibit at the Park Museum at Giant Forest.

Family and Description

The wolverine is by far the largest and most formidable of the weasel family. It is a strong, heavy-bodied animal, seldom weighing over 135 pounds, or exceeding 22 inches in height or 40 inches in length, with a tail vertebrae about 8 inches long covered with long, coarse hairs drooping to a brush. The head is short and wide, with powerful jaws set with heavy teeth. The legs are short and heavy and the feet are armed with long sharp claws. The coloring of the pelage is unique and beautiful, being mixed with black, yellow and gray. The front and sides of the head are grayish, while the body is black varying to chestnut brown with a broad undefined yellowish band along the sides and over the hips, meeting at the base of the tail.

The wolverine, commonly speaking, is not an aggressive animal, but will fight desperately when attacked or for the care of its young. When once engaged in combat the beast knows no such thing as retreat, dying, if need be, but never falling back. He fights as long as a single spark of life remains. Mountain lion, bear and mountain coyotes, whether coming singly or collectively upon a wolverine, seem to realize his ferociousness and quickly give way to his path. They know through long experience, that this is an animal which must be let alone so undoubtedly believe in the logic of "live and let live". The wolverine not only expects the larger animals to let him alone but requires them to give up their own prey and permit him to satisfy his gluttonous appetite.

King Beast of the Sierras

That the wolverine ranks as king beast of the Sierras, to me there is not a shadow of doubt. This fact is born out by reason of my own observations, as well as those of others who have noted their conduct toward other wild animals at certain times and at various places within Sequoia National Park - a few instances of which I will relate:

July 30, 1906 - Two adult bear, one black and one brown, gave over to one adult wolverine, with excitement and great haste at Buck Canyon, the carcass of a cow upon which they were feeding.

October 1, 1907 - Three large mountain coyotes that were feeding on the carcass of a horse at Grouse Flat vacated the vicinity immediately upon the approach of one medium-sized wolverine.

September 30, 1908 - One large and one medium-sized mountain lions were feasting on a deer that they had recently killed at Willow Meadows, but after much growling and threatened resistance on the part of the larger lion both gave way to the approach of one medium-sized wolverine.

Feeding Habits

The wolverine has no winning bursts of speed to catch his food supply; nor has he the gift of stalking his quarry. His lack of speed and skill has forced the animal to be a scavenger and eat anything in the way of flesh that is captured or found dead. He has a voracious appetite but no doubt can fast for many days, a condition to which he is often forced during the deep snow of winter. Because of his voracious appetite, the animal is often called the "Glutton". This seems appropriate, for not elsewhere in North America do I know of a mammal in proportion to its size with such capacity for coarse food at one given time, or which has such powerful organs for the digestion as that of the wolverine. His principal food in the Sierra Nevadas consists of the yellow-bellied marmots, carrion gophers, rats and mice, with occasional sick or crippled wild animals which he is able to drag down. With his long claws and great strength he can dig very rapidly and catch many of the smaller rodents in their burrows. The wolverine does not hunt in mass formation, but simply braves it alone in a solitary way.

The wolverine are tireless wanderers and do most of their traveling at night, but when forced by hunger they will hunt by day. They have but little migratory impulse and usually remain in the vicinity where born. They do not dig burrows in which to live or for shelter and protection, as do some of their smaller brethren, but simply lie down in places at random, usually under some shelving rock or at the base of a tree.

Bad Morals

The wolverine has very bad morals that have gained him the enmity of not a few. They often follow the trap lines of fur trappers, eating or destroying the catches, baits, and, at times, drag away the traps. They will, also, occasionally invade the ranger's and trapper's cabins by tearing a hole through the roof or side-wall, destroy the food contents, and what they can neither eat nor carry away they defile in such manner as to render it unfit for use. They will expend a surprising amount of labor in the carrying off and burying of food stuffs and often include other articles for which they have no use.

Personal Experiences with Wolverine

The tradition that wolverine are ready to attack any human being gives the impression of a very dangerous animal; but I regard it as pure fiction. On two occasions have I come upon wolverine alone in the daytime in their natural haunts in the Sequoia National Park, where they had probably never before been disturbed by man. Neither time did they show any signs of combat. From the actions of these two animals, I base my belief that the wolverine will under any ordinary circumstances give way to the presence of man.

It was on the morning of August 31, 1905 that I came upon my first wolverine in the free state of his existence at the eastern edge of Giant Forest on the Alta Trail, elevation 7,500 feet. The animal was a very large one and was busily engaged in an effort to dig a "ground hog" from an embankment a few feet off the trail. He was making rapid progress. So determined was the animal in the pursuit of his quarry that not until I had approached within less than forty feet did he notice my presence; and when he saw me in such proximity it gave him a great shock of surprise and amazement such as he had perhaps never before had in his life - as was clearly demonstrated by his actions. He immediately sprang upon a large fir log at the butt of which I was standing and turned facing me, gave a coarse guttural growl and showed his teeth. His small black beadlike eyes were focused direct at my countenance as if to detect any signs of hostility. His nose was then hoisted high in the air as if to determine the unusual scent; the ears, which with respect to size and shape, resembled two silver dollars, stood well out from the head as if to grasp any unusual sound; the white pearly claws of the front feet were occasionally scratched on the bark of the log as if preparing for immediate use in warfare.

After remaining in this statuesque attitude for some five minutes, the beast advanced slowly on the log towards me and looked me direct in the face. When he had approached within about fifteen feet he suddenly stopped as if to collect his philosophical mind in reasoning out a proposition where death threatened him. His advance seemed for the purpose of getting a better look at me in order to ascertain more accurately as to just what sort of a being I was, or whether or not I was a hostile genus or hereditary enemy for he showed no signs of anger, fear or aggression. However, at that very critical moment I had my pistol leveled at his heart and my finger on the trigger, with the exception of matching my skill in marksmanship against his temper and grit in case he showed evidence of combat. He stood for a few seconds scrutinizing me from head to foot, then began to retreat by walking backwards on the log whence he came for a distance of some thirty feet, sprang to the ground and departed into the forest. I followed the animal for a distance of some two hundred yards, but all the while he kept his distance and close watch of me by looking back over his shoulders. On three different occasions I stamped my feet rapidly on the ground as if in running pursuit, and each occasion he would immediately right-about-face and advance a few steps towards me. Having amused myself after this fashion for some few minutes, the animal was permitted to go his own way into the depths of the forest.

The second wolverine I met was on the afternoon of July 30, 1906, at Buck Canyon, 7 miles east of Giant Forest, elevation 7,800 ft. This was the same animal to which I have referred as having driven two bears away from a carcass. Two men and myself in hiding some 150 feet away watched this affair without any of the animals detecting our presence. After the fracas had ended between the three animals and the wolverine was in possession of the carcass, I decided to make a test as to whether or not he would yield to my approach. I shifted my position by crawling a few paces to a huge boulder that stood within about fifty feet of him and between us. I then crawled up to the boulder, peeped around one side, and for a few moments watched his method of repast. The bears had left little but large bones which they were unable to chew; however, the wolverine crushed these as if they were mere chalk and swallowed them with rapacious delight. After watching the animal for some five minutes, pistol in hand, I stepped out in plain sight and advanced slowly towards him. The wolverine looked up at me, gave a coarse growl, grabbed a large bone in his mouth, then walked slowly into the shelter of a dense cherry thicket.

Do Wolverines Climb Trees?

The question is often asked, "Do Wolverine climb trees?" To this I would say that never have I seen wolverine climb trees but have a verified record of such.

The occurrence took place during the month of May, 1903, at Mineral King California. Two Forest Rangers, Clarence W. Fry, Three Rivers, California and William A. Hindman, Visalia, California, came suddenly upon a wolverine that climbed trees and without hesitation. The animal, when first routed from its lair, gave a few jumps, climbed up a large fir tree some thirty feet, then backed to the ground quickly. When the animal reached the ground, upon being pursued closely by both men and a dog, it climbed up a second large fir tree a distance of some sixty feet, at which point it was shot and killed by Ranger Fry.

Breeding Habits

Little is known about the breeding habits of the wolverine. It is supposed that young are born in June and range from one to four in number. Upon two occasions I have come upon beds in Sequoia National Park where young had been born and reared, as was plainly evidenced by the premises and surroundings. The first was found on the north spur of Mt. Silliman on September 10, 1909, elevation 10,800 feet. The second was on the south side of Vandever Mountain, on September 18, 1918, elevation 11,000 feet. In both cases the choice for beds or dens was under shelving rocks and but little preparation had been made for the occasion. A round-like excavation some 6 inches in depth and 5 feet in width, with scant lining of grasses and small pieces of pine boughs, comprised the whole. The strange feature of both lairs found was that no bones of the animals that had fallen victim of their prey could be found, as is always the case in such instances with the lion, bear, fox, wolf and lynx. No doubt these had been consumed by the parent mother as food, or carried away for some distance.

In all my mountain experience I have never yet heard a wolverine, when captured or otherwise, to give voice to anything but a coarse guttural growl. Perhaps through long experience they know the value of silence and prefer to keep secret their general whereabouts.

The wolverine is an animal endowed by nature with the strongest of constitution, philosophical mind and excellent reasoning power. Had this not been the case the species could not, with its many handicaps, have survived to this time. The wolverine's sense of smell and hearing is fair, but his vision is short, and his shape such that he is a poor runner. They do not hibernate in winter, as do the bear, but are forced to hunt daily for their living. Neither do they migrate to lowlands during deep snow periods in winter, as do many other animals, but brave the storm-swept elements on upper timber line where it would seem that no living thing could exist.

Should the Wolverine be Protected or Exterminated?

The wolverine form one of the most interesting members of the California mammal life and steps should be taken for their immediate protection. Their extermination, to me, seems a very serious crime in which man will be held to strict accountability. Furthermore, I believe that these animals have played an important part in helping to save the larger game animals during attacks of contagious diseases by consuming as food the dead and sick animals, thus preventing spread of contagion.

So the question now at issue is, "Is the Wolverine worth while?" If so, they should be protected. If the wolverine is not worth preserving, at their present rate of extinction they will soon go down and out and will pass to join in history the mastodon and mammoth of the past.