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GOLDS: The tale of the Port Moody wolverine

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Recently, I attended a presentation on wolverines where I learned more about these fascinating animals. Although mainly associated with northern boreal forests and arctic tundra, B.C. is one of their remaining strongholds in North America. Even though wolverines are a species at risk in B.C. with a population roughly estimated to be between 2,000 and 4,000, some trapping is still allowed here. Associated with remote wilderness and known for their fearless attitude, wolverines remain one of the least understood of our larger wild animals.

Short and stocky with unusually large feet, wolverines are the largest terrestrial member of the weasel family. They are only about a metre in length with an average weight between 15 and 20 kg.

Their large feet act like snowshoes and allow them to cover many kilometres with remarkable ease in the winter. Radio-tagging studies carried out in Montana's Glacier National Park and adjacent areas in B.C. and Alberta have shown wolverines, especially males, have huge territories (over 1,000 square kilometres) and cover amazing distances, 30 km or more, on daily excursions that go up and down steep mountain slopes.

For example, one wolverine was recorded climbing 1,500 vertical meters in 90 minutes during the winter in Glacier National Park.

What I had not realized until I heard Doug Chadwick's presentation (who has also written a book about wolverines) was that these animals have playful personalities and appear to be quite sociable despite their often solitary nature.

Wolverines mainly scavenge for food but they can kill animals as large as a deer. They seem to do best in areas where there is a biodiverse mix of large predators so that they can take advantage of the kills of other animals. Females give birth to their young in the spring typically in burrows they dig within deep snowpack at high elevations.

While found across most of B.C., wolverines are not present on Haida Gwaii and are now thought to be extirpated (i.e., locally extinct) from Vancouver Island. Wolverine are thought to be relatively rare in the southwestern portion of mainland B.C. but, given their preference for wilderness, there is only scant information to go by.

Several years ago, when the Burke Mountain Naturalists supported a winter wildlife study in the Upper Pitt River Valley, we were delighted when wolverine tracks were identified. This area, adjacent to remote wilderness and high elevation mountains in Garibaldi Provincial Park would have ideal wolverine habitat. As the crow flies (or as wolverines travel), it's not that far away from the Lower Mainland.

Perhaps then, it is not so astonishing that a wolverine was observed in Metro Vancouver in 2003. I first became aware of this animal when knowledgeable naturalists reported seeing it in the Maplewood Flats area of North Vancouver, an area on Burrard Inlet similar to Shoreline Park and protected for its high wildlife values. We surmised the wolverine may have come out of the Seymour watershed by following the Seymour River downstream.

The next surprise came that October when my son, who was a volunteer at the Wildlife Rescue Centre in Burnaby, reported a wolverine had been taken into care. I learned this wolverine had been caught in Port Moody where it had taken refuge under an abandoned car and, judging by all the feathers, seemed to be feasting on Canada geese. Presumably, it had swum across Burrard Inlet from Maplewood. The wolverine had been reported as an abandoned bear cub. When staff from Wildlife Rescue attempted to trap it they found they had a little more than they bargained for and were not able to capture the animal without one of its teeth breaking when it bit into a pole. It was soon discovered the wolverine, a healthy young male, also had a former tendon injury that prevented from using its right front leg. The wonderful folks at Wildlife Rescue arranged for tooth and tendon

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surgery and, by November, the wolverine was ready for release into remote wilderness close to the northern portion of the Coquitlam drinking watershed and the Upper Pitt River Valley.

This story of Port Moody's wolverine should have had a happy outcome but such was not the case. The next summer, a dead wolverine was found on the beach near Mossom Creek. An autopsy showed this to be a wolverine with a root canal job — and there was only one of them in the world. It appeared he had a fatal fight with a larger predator, possibly a cougar. Nonetheless, this wolverine had successfully managed on his own for almost a year. My guess is he was dropping by to check on the status of the Canada geese.

The wolverine is certainly a reminder that wilderness is only a short distance away from our doorsteps. So, with the sun shining and the mountains gleaming under a fresh cover of snow, raise your eyes and imagine that, somewhere up on Coquitlam Mountain, wolverines may be cavorting in the sunshine.

For more information, visit www.wildliferescue.ca/PDF/Wolverine.pdf.

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