

Fisher

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THE FISHER is a midsized carnivore and the largest terrestrial member of the weasel family in the commonwealth. Fishers have a long, well-furred body, short legs and a full tail. Although the majority of the pelage is dark or chocolate brown, the fur on the tail, legs and rump is usually black, and fur on the back and shoulders is grizzled with gold and silver variations enhanced by tricolored guard hairs.

Historic data suggest that fishers were distributed throughout most Pennsylvania forests prior to intensive deforestation during the 1800s. Historic accounts suggest that populations began to decline in southwest Pennsylvania due to early colonial development. Subsequent declines occurred as forests were cleared during the 1800s, until the species was eventually extirpated. The last populations are believed to have been in Clearfield, Elk, Cameron, Clinton, Potter and Sullivan counties.

Today's fisher population is the result of reintroduction and natural expansion from adjacent states. West Virginia reintroduced 23 fishers in 1969 and New York transferred 30 fishers from the Adirondacks to the Catskills Region in 1979. Pennsylvania populations are likely to have been influenced by dispersal from both states. From 1994 to 1998, 190 fishers were reintroduced throughout northern Pennsylvania.

Fisher populations have grown and expanded during the past decade. The number of fishers caught incidentally and released by Pennsylvania trappers has increased dramatically during recent years. Prior to 2002, less than 100 were caught incidentally, whereas during the 2009-10 season an estimated 1,171 were caught and released. Sightings and roadkills have increased as well.

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PA's First Fisher Trapping Season

During 2010, a limited fisher trapping season was established. The season—Dec. 18 thru Dec. 23—was limited to WMUs 2C, 2D, 2E and 2F. A total of 2,886 trappers purchased a fisher harvest permit, however only 28 percent of permit holders attempted to trap a fisher during 2010. This exploratory season yielded a harvest of 152 fisher (88 males, 62 females, and 2 of undetermined sex). On average, it required slightly more than three days of effort to be successful, and most trappers maintained 6 to 10 sets each night.

Based on results from this season, a short 2011 fisher trapping season has been adopted to further assess trapper participation and harvest success rates in areas of the commonwealth that support relatively high fisher densities. The Game Commission continues to identify additional WMUs where fisher populations can be trapped on a sustainable basis. □

HARRY WADE

