

On the Path

The Way of the Wolverine

By Keith Hammer

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My only sighting of a wolverine lasted all of a split-second, beginning with a loud hiss of disgust nearby, followed by a flash of angry fur dashing off the open ridgeline of the Swan Range's Hash Mountain, and concluding with the snapping of branches as it beat its way downhill through the cover of heavy forest. Fortunately, the Swan Range is among the last refuges of wolverine in the lower 48 states and affords those of us who frequent these mountains opportunities to observe their sign and habits.

Though I've only seen that one wolverine, I can think of no other species I've enjoyed more through their tracks and sign during repeat visits to some of my favorite places over the years. What appeared to be a single set of tracks one winter day surprisingly turned into two sets where they parted to investigate opposite sides of a small tree. I learned from a knowledgeable friend that wolverine young indeed step in the same tracks as their parent and that both father and mother spend time out and about with their young.

A couple of years later I came upon an overnight "bivouac" den dug into the snow and used by a single wolverine under that very same tree, complete with a sunning deck near a second entrance to the den. One set of day-old tracks in and one set of fresh tracks out distinguished this den from a maternal den, where tracks radiate outwards from the den as the mother makes numerous trips out and about while nursing her kits in the den.

These and other observations over the years give credence to the importance of learned behavior passed on from parent wolverine to young, right down to those specific preferred sites for denning, rendezvousing, hunting, and scavenging. Indeed, when an elk succumbed to deep snow in this same mountain basin a few years later, it was not long before wolverine had dug her out and made quite a feast of her.

Maurice Hornocker and Howard Hash conducted a seminal study of wolverine in the South Fork Flathead in the 1970s, monitoring 24 wolverine for four years in a study area that included a big chunk of the Bob Marshall Wilderness and the Flathead and Swan Mountain Ranges that line opposite sides of Hungry Horse Reservoir. They found one male wolverine's home range stretched all the way from Swan Peak to Columbia Mountain!

An extensive study of wolverine in Glacier National Park took place over most of the past decade and is described in user-friendly terms by Doug Chadwick in his book "The Wolverine Way." Due to the nature of the beast being studied, however, the Glacier Wolverine Project also tracked wolverine traveling north into Canada and south into the Swan Range.

Chadwick, a frequent writer for National Geographic Magazine and author of numerous books, was a volunteer for the project. He writes first-hand about the research, the researchers, the cast of volunteers, and the cast of wolverines that

provided not just scientific data but in-your-face encounters shedding light on their behavior and dispositions.

Chadwick describes in detail a 30-40 pound animal known to be one of the most fierce and capable of wresting food away from grizzly bear while simultaneously exhibiting compassionate social interactions among its kin, including the active role of fathers in raising their young. Into this mix Chadwick adds entertaining descriptions of the project volunteers and their willingness to ski and snowshoe through some of America's most rugged terrain and worst weather to live-trap wolverine in large log boxes, fit them with electronic location transmitters, then follow them around with radio antennas, orbiting satellites and laptop computers.

Chadwick sets his account of wolverine behavior and habitat requirements fully within the paradoxical context of an increasingly rare species again being considered for endangered status under the Endangered Species Act, after having been denied such protection previously because enough was not known about them, in part because they have become so rare. Chadwick also describes the prospects for the aggressive wolverine within the context of their absolute need for high-elevation, cool habitats in the face of global warming. Survival is not only about being tough.

"The Wolverine Way" is a great read on many levels. It provides the reader with insights into not just the way of the wolverine, but the interactions among the many species of wildlife that call high alpine environments their home and the people that love to recreate there.

Keith Hammer grew up hiking, skiing, camping, hunting, and fishing in the Swan Mountains. He has worked a number of jobs, from Forest Service trail worker to logger to backcountry guide, and currently works as an environmental consultant and head of the nonprofit Swan View Coalition. His column appears regularly in this paper and is archived at www.swanrange.org. Keith can be reached at 406-755-1379 or keith@swanview.org.

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Wolverine tracks in the high country of the Swan Range. Swan View Coalition Photo.