

Status of Fishers in the Upper Midwest and Iowa



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Biological description of Fishers in the Upper Midwest (adapted from MN DNR)

Fishers (*Pekania pennanti*) are members of the weasel family Mustelidae, and have a body built similarly to mink, only larger. Fishers are 24-47 inches long from their nose to the tip of their tail. Female Fishers often weigh 5-8 pounds, while males typically weigh 8-13 pounds and as much as 20 pounds. The fur color of Fishers is typically a light or grizzled brown on their head tapering to dark brown on their body and solid black on their tail and hind legs. Tan or silver hair color may be present on their upper body. Similar to other mustelids, Fishers use “delayed implantation”, in which eggs are fertilized but do not implant for development until their body condition is ready. Eggs implant about 10 days after they give birth to a litter. For the next several months, the young remain as small embryos. Two months before birth, the embryos develop into fetuses. During late winter or early spring, females will birth 1-5 young (kits) which are blind, immobile, and fully dependent on their mother’s care. Litters are typically born in a den, often a hollow tree, log, or rock cavity, in which they will live throughout the summer. Within days after giving birth the female will seek out a new mate. Young Fishers stay with their mother for the summer, and then leave in early fall to establish their own territories.

Self-sustaining breeding populations of Fishers exist in Minnesota and Wisconsin. A limited harvest is allowed in both states. During the past 10 years, it is notable that Fishers have expanded their range and population size in the southeast region of Minnesota.

Diet of Fishers

Fishers are generalist carnivores and primarily prey upon snowshoe hare, squirrels, and porcupine in northern latitudes, but also consume mice, chipmunks, rabbits, and deer fawns. They’ll also readily eat carrion, berries, and nuts. Fishers are also excellent climbers and are known to hunt in the canopy of trees.

Historical Accounts of Fishers in Iowa

Unlike most other accounts of mammal species originally found in Iowa prior to European settlement, information is lacking for Fishers. Only a few accounts of Fishers in Iowa are available from the early 1800s, which are from journals, archives, and other sources. From those accounts, it’s believed fishers were native and present in the northern half of Iowa in low numbers. However, the fisher was likely extirpated (eliminated) by the early 1800s in Iowa, whereas many of Iowa’s other larger species of mammals were extirpated from Iowa during the late 1800s (J. Bowles, *Distribution and Biogeography of Mammals in Iowa*, 1975).

Current Status of Fishers in Iowa

Occasional sightings of Fishers have been reported over the past 50 years, but many of those were unconfirmed or poorly documented. In recent years, several reports of Fishers within northeastern Iowa have been confirmed by the Iowa Department of Natural Resource (DNR). Fisher populations in Minnesota are expanding southward and it's likely that individuals in Iowa dispersed from this expanding population. Since 2016, an average of one confirmed Fisher per year has been observed in northeastern Iowa. Confirmed reports have been from trail camera photos, as road kills, or hunter harvest.



A fisher killed by a vehicle on Hwy 9 between Decorah and Waukon in 2022.

The Fisher is not currently identified in Iowa Code as a species of wildlife for the State of Iowa to manage - similar to the black bear and mountain lion. When early wildlife and game management laws were established in the late 1800s and early 1900s, Fishers were already extirpated from the State and not recognized for management or protection. Therefore, the Iowa DNR does not have authority to manage or establish harvest regulations for Fishers. Similar to black bear and mountain lions in Iowa, the addition of Fishers to be recognized as a wildlife species under Iowa law would require approval by the Iowa Legislature.

Reporting Fisher Sightings in Iowa

The Iowa DNR is interested in receiving Fisher sightings from the public. Photos or videos are extremely helpful in verifying the identity of the animal. If you have a possible Fisher report in Iowa, please contact Iowa DNR Furbearer Biologist Vince Eversizer at vince.eversizer@dnr.iowa.gov. You may also call 515-725-8200 or contact your local county Wildlife Biologist or DNR Conservation Officer (<https://www.iowadnr.gov/about/contact>).