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IN SEARCH OF THE WOLVERINE

What we're learning about one of the toughest
(and most elusive) animals in the world

BY FRASER LOB
WITH PHOTOGRAPHY BY KYLE HAMILTON

ABOUT 15 KILOMETRES into the snowy backcountry northwest of tiny Elkton, in British Columbia's rugged Elk Valley, I step off the snowmobile and follow a set of distinctive clawed footprints.

"They're definitely wolverine tracks," says Tony Clevenger, a wildlife biologist with the Western Transportation Institute at Montana State University who's leading a wolverine sampling study in the region. We trace the tracks for a few hundred metres and search various crevices for scat to pick up for later analysis.

Back on the machines, we ride deeper into the valley, crossing avalanche paths and steep, rocky canyons, eventually snowshoeing another half kilometre through the snow-high snow drifts to one of Clevenger's wolverine sampling sites, where a skinned, cutting beaver carcass is nailed to a pine tree, its flesh ripped apart. "Looks like a fox did this," he says, "but I won't know for sure until we send these hairs to the lab for testing."

He carefully packs the hair samples off beaver into the baggies he had wrapped around the tree, and after labelling and sealing the samples into individual packets, it's time to add more bait. We chop another skinned beaver out of the study log we've been carrying, then spray three metal spikes into the tree trunk to act as traps. I position myself to do my trap sets, and Clevenger holds the carcass in place as I nail it beside the trapped one. Clevenger then adds to the stretch with a cloth soaked in a horrible-smelling concoction of shark glands and other pungent substances. He ties it on a string, throws it over a branch, then pulls it into the canopy, a beacon for carnivores far and wide.

Clevenger and his fellow researchers have gone to great lengths studying wolverines in the central and southern Canadian Rockies since 2010 — setting snowshoeing, snowshoeing or helicoptering into remote areas to set up a grid of bait traps like this one (complete with motion- and heat-activated cameras that snap multiple images when any animal approaches) to collect every hair sample they can find. It's a non-invasive form of sampling, since no wolverines are physically trapped or collared. "The beauty of that is you can cover a large area and the animals don't even see you," says Clevenger, "but you still get the genetic data. And you're studying the population fully, whereas other studies may look at one individual with a collar and only learn from there." In 2016 alone, the researchers surveyed more than 8,200 square kilometres.

Dear Greetings!:

For the past six years Wolverine researcher Tony Clevenger bit off a big task: surveying the wolverine "meta population" in the British Columbia portion of the Crown of the Continent Ecosystem - all 20,000 square kilometers of it (7,700 square miles). His research has just been featured in [Canadian Geographic Magazine](#), and we wanted to be sure you had a chance to [read it](#). (*Look for link titled: "In Search of Wolverines"*)

Clevenger found - and not surprisingly - that wolverine numbers are healthy in protected areas like Banff and Kootenay national parks. But outside protected areas, the numbers aren't so good. "Detection rates [in unprotected areas] were only about 25 to 30 per cent, whereas in the national parks it was 85 to 90 per cent," he said.

In the Lower 48 researchers think there may only be 250 - 300 wolverines roaming

the wilds. Clevenger says that genetic studies have determined that Canadian wolverines genetic exchange remain important for U.S. wolverine long-term survival. However, land management practices in B.C. and Alberta near the Canadian - U.S. border have increasingly fractured the wildlife landscape, making the future of that connectivity uncertain. "Maintaining connectivity is crucial," he says.

Wolverines rely on late spring snowpack for their breeding success. Climate change, says Clevenger, "is one of the greatest challenges wolverines face because it further fragments their habitat."

To many people, the Grizzly Bear epitomizes and serve as the bellweatehr for Wilderness and healthy nature. Clevenger thinks the wolverine may be a more sensitive indicator. "If you lose wolverines," he says, "it's a pretty good indicator something's wrong."

Headwaters Montana and the Flathead Wild Team continue to focus on the Transboundary Flathead region of the Crown, as the key piece in the connectivity puzzle, based on Clevenger's science and that compiled by the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative (Y2Y).

Cheers and Have a Great Holiday Season!



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Don't forget our annual holiday party!

Tuesday, December 20, 2016, 5:30-8:00pm
Kalispell Brewing Company, 412 South Main, Kalispell
Cash bar
Heavy hors d'oeuvre by Delectable Catering and Desserts

Featuring: Whitefish native, Don Nelson and his photography on Nepal - one year after the earthquake.
Bring a used piece of outdoor equipment in good condition as a donation for Kalispell Youth Homes. ~ Thank you!