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Wolverine Work North of the 49th

March 10, 2015

Dear Dave :

While Buffalo, New York, (150cm/59" snow) or Boston, Massachusetts, (closer to 304cm/120" of snow) may be where the snow fell this winter, the center of gravity for the snow-loving North American **wolverine** population remains the Rocky Mountains of Canada and the northern United States.

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Dr. Tony Clevenger and his colleagues at Wolverine Watch have been hard at the job of studying this elusive mammal since 2010. We caught up with him in Banff at the tail end of this winter's study period.

We thought you'd like to know a bit more about the incredible effort being made to understand and document the population and conservation challenges of one of Nature's most awe-inspiring creatures.

Cheers!

Executive Director
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Wolverines in the Southern Canadian Rockies

Will Canadian and Montana Populations Stay Connected?

The geography of the Flathead Wild campaign covers some very significant home ground. In particular, the home ground of the wolverine, *Gulo gulo*, perhaps the toughest creature in the Rockies.

One considers oneself extremely lucky to catch even a glimpse of the extremely rare wolverine. The Wolverine Watch research project has been in the field in British Columbia, Canada, conducting research since 2010, and will conclude in 2016. (Photo: Keith Webb)

Reputed for its ability to scale the tallest mountains in a fraction of human time, travel cross country with little regard for weather or terrain, subsist on carrion or ground squirrels, as well as for its fabled ferociousness, one could ask, "Can anything stop this critter?"

The answer, regretfully, is, "Yes!" What stops them? Highways and humans.

Dr. Tony Clevenger has been studying the wolverine in its vast, southern and central Canadian Rockies domain since 2010 in an effort to understand the impacts of highways and human disturbance on the animal's distribution and genetics.

Science has documented the difficulty for many wildlife species to stay genetically connected across highways. The wolverine may be particularly susceptible because of its avoidance of highways, and its vulnerability to being killed when it does attempt to cross them. And though the wolverine breeds relatively rapidly, it is easily trapped outside of protected areas like parks and wildlife sanctuaries.

Dr. Clevenger along with Alberta-based researcher Jason Fisher have surveyed some **60,000 square kilometers** south of Banff National Park to Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park, and from the Front Range of the Rockies to the Rocky

Mountain Trench. Their study is part of an even larger wolverine study coordinated with the British Columbia Ministry of Environment that covers **72,000 square kilometer** (see study area in red in map below) in the southern Selkirk and Purcell Mountain Ranges. Dr. Clevenger and his team broke their study area into four zones, taking a year or longer to assess each.

Studying

Dr. Tony Clevenger co-leads the Canadian wolverine research effort with Jason Fisher as part of the [Wolverine Watch](#) research group based out of Montana State University in Bozeman, Montana.

Click [here](#) to view larger map hosted on Headwaters Montana web site.
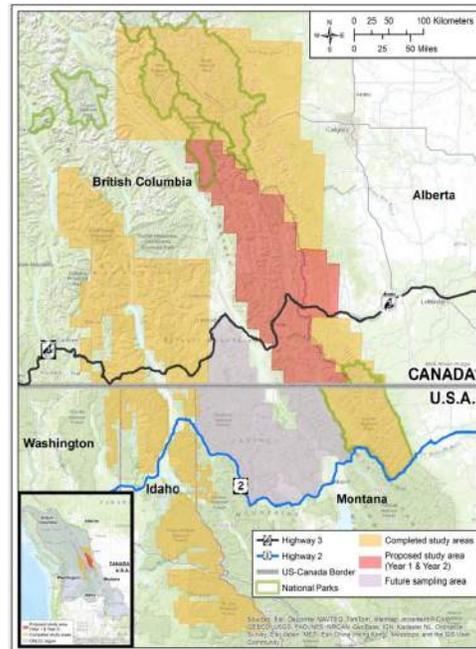
wolverines looks deceptively easy, even romantic. It goes something like this: *Hike, snowshoe, ski, snowmobile or fly a helicopter into the beautiful Rocky Mountains; set up barbed wire "hair traps" baited with a frozen beaver carcass and musk scent; hike out; wait for the wolverine to sample the bait; go back into the beautiful mountains and retrieve hair from the barbed wire traps; repeat three times at monthly intervals during winter, send the hair to the genetics lab for analysis; analyze the results; inform land management agencies of the results; influence land use planning; write and publish a research paper.* Simple.

...Except for the challenge of the sheer size of the study area, the formidable winter weather, and the determination and fortitude needed to work long hours for uncertain results a year or more down the road.

Add to the physical challenge that of securing funding to keep the study alive. Dr. Clevenger has cobbled together funding from Parks Canada, B.C. and Alberta wildlife agencies and a handful of intrepid foundations. The public is welcome to **contribute**.

Dr. Clevenger and his colleagues will release their results in peer-reviewed journals in the coming years. Current observations are speculative, but based on direct observation. What appears to be going on in the southern Canadian Rockies and in this vital link or lifeline to the threatened wolverine population in the northern U.S. Rockies?

The bait tree: The gruesome fun of setting and resetting and resetting wolverine hair trap station with the preferred bait, beaver *(Castor canadensis)*. (Photo: www.wolverinewatch.org)

A wolverine feasting on a beaver carcass, inadvertently leaving hair samples (and its DNA) on the barbed wire wrapped around the tree. (Photo: Courtesy of Tony Clevenger)

Wolverine numbers in the protected park areas seem to be doing well. Over a 3 year period 64 individuals were identified in the surveys conducted in Banff, Yoho and Kootenay National Parks. Here ninety percent of hair traps get 'hit' by wolverines, whereas outside protected areas only 25% of the traps were visited in Kananaskis Country (not protected). Last winter surveys conducted in the Waterton Lakes-Crowsnest Pass area only yielded 8% visited. Once the surveys are completed in 2016 the team will be able to determine the amount of gene flow across Highway 3 near Crowsnest Pass. Clevenger's Banff National Park research found extremely low gene flow across the Trans-Canada Highway (Highway 1) to the north.

Volunteers Nikki Heim and Ben Dorsey travel with big packs to a wolverine site near Egypt lake in Banff National Park, Alberta. (Photo: WolverineWatch.org)

Female wolverines appear to be avoiding major highway corridors altogether, and overall wolverine numbers appear to fall significantly outside of protected areas and southward towards the US-Canadian border, for reasons that are not yet completely clear. Dr. Clevenger will set up his hair traps again next winter for a final season in the Elk

and Flathead river valleys. This will culminate six years of surveys that have covered more than 60,000 km2, a vast area - wolverine-scaled - consisting of varied landscapes, both disturbed and undisturbed.

In the meantime, the **Flathead Wild Team** continues to campaign for the expansion of Waterton Lakes National Park into the Flathead River valley and for legislation of a Wildlife Management Area form Banff to the Montana border. These goals, when achieved, will help ensure safe havens and passage, and room for wolverine and other wildlife to roam.

Overpasses like this one on the Trans-Canada Highway (Highway 1) that crosses Banff National Park may be necessary at many other locations in southern Canada and the Northern Rockies of Montana and Idaho in order to allow wildlife populations to stay connected and healthy at a continental scale. (Photo: http://emorfes.com/2012/10/15/photography-wildlife-crossings/)

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