

Juba and the Pine Marten

by Penny Randell

Considering the many who ignore the colder weather and hike our beloved mountain area, there could be a rewarding conquest to find the rare Pine Marten who dwells in the forests. Juba at the helm, researching this critter that is as rare as it is interesting. Pine martens are found throughout Canada, Alaska, and parts of the northern United States, including Colorado. This long, slender, yellowish to brown and sometimes black animal is a member of the family Mustelidae and is a weasel. However, this guy is larger and heavier than most. They prefer denning in mature coniferous or mixed wood forests which provide protection from predators and establish shelter sites for kits.

Although I encourage a hunt for such, chances are great that this secretive animal will never be seen. They dwell deep in the forest, far from roads or fields. Too, they prefer a significant snowfall. In short, a pine marten maintains a terrain that is difficult to access. They are readily attracted to wildlife hides and guesthouse gardens where food can be found. This is a favored species and has been assigned legal protection since 1988. It is illegal to injure, kill, or capture this animal. It is also illegal to damage, destroy, or obstruct access to their den sites. This critter was once widespread throughout Britain, but persecution and deforestation during the 19th century forced them into serious decline. They were re-introduced into Scotland and are protected by the Scots to this very day.

Chances are good that discovery of this animal means confusion between it and the Least weasel. Pine martens and Least weasels are similar in body structure. Nonetheless, they do have differences that enable one to tell the difference. This weasel is much smaller than a pine marten and can only measure up to 10 inches compared to 20.5 inches for the marten. The pine marten can weigh up to 3 pounds and the Least weasel weighs in at 8.8 ounces. In addition, the diet of each species differs. They are both considered carnivores, but the pine marten prefers fruits, nuts and honey due to their treetop location.

The pine marten maintains an arboreal existence and is active only at dusk and night. They are shy and solitary and highly territorial, whereas the Least weasel is active during the day. These rare boys are excellent climbers and can easily gain access to poultry and game pens. They can squeeze through a hole of about 45mm in diameter. They are experts at finding rotten wood and enlarging entrance ways. These attempts can be prevented through the use of electrical wiring. This may deter the animal, but most likely he will return to check for status of the power current.

Looking at sexual maturity, our study states such is complete by one year, but effective breeding occurs around two years of age. Remembering that although this *weasel* remains pretty much solitary, he will socialize to breed. Polygamous behavior is well accepted, for females experience multiple periods of heat. Estrus begins in July or August with intense courtship lasting up to 15 days. Late winter usually means embryonic implantation with active gestation lasting eight months, including the delayed implantation. In late March or April birth is given, with the litter ranging from one to five kits. Reproduction is strongly influenced by diet and it often fails if the male becomes too thin.

As mentioned, denning in treetops and various wooded materials affords safety for birthing as well as raising the offspring. In fact, dens have two classifications: natal dens for parturition (delivery), or maternal dens, where females relocate their kits after birth. These dens are appropriately lined with grass, moss and leaves inserted by the female. Most females spend 50% of their time attending these cavities during pre-weaning and complete weaning. Often kits are moved to another den around seven weeks. Interaction from the male has not been documented. Babies are born with thick, short fur and are blind, deaf and without teeth. Eyes open from 34-38 days and they begin eating solid food at 36-45 days. Six weeks after birth they are weaned.

The pine marten is scientifically considered to be an opportunistic predator. If at rest they only require 80 calories a day, or about three voles. In fact, voles dominate the carnivorous side of their diet. An exception would be the *snowshoe hare* in winter. Meadow voles are taken in excess and seriously deplete their population. Oddly, deer mice and shrews are somewhat ignored, but will be eaten should the pine marten find himself in a pinch for food. Diet is shifted seasonally and annually. For example, consumption can be more diverse in summer with a dependency on fruit, vegetation and insects.

In captivity a pine marten has lived to age 15 and has been documented as living to 14.5 years in the wild. Survival rates vary by region, exposure to trapping, quality of habitat and of course, age. This critter remains vulnerable to predation from raptors and other carnivores. The threat of predation is believed to play a huge role when choosing a territory or home. Open range is definitely avoided particularly due to the presence of the coyote, a fierce predator of the pine marten. It is in the deciduous forests in northeastern British Columbia that most predation is attributed to raptors. Here in Colorado this dear one must watch for attacks from the great horned owl, bald eagle, golden eagle, lynx, mountain lion, wolverine, grizzly bear and the American black bear.

Fur trade permeated the lives of these poor fellows by the turn of the 20th century and the original population was decimated for their shiny and luxuriant coat. Unfortunately, their fur resembles their close relative the sable. Businesses such as the Hudson's Bay Company trapped the pine marten to near extinction. Thankfully, many protective measures and reintroduction efforts have been rewarded by a successful gain in a variety of populations. Still this animal suffers. Deforestation remains the culprit. This valuable species is allowed to be trapped for its fur in all but a few states. Besides this, other causes of death include drowning, starvation, exposure to high and low temperatures, choking and death from infection associated with injury.

This American marten hosts several internal and external parasites. They have even been known to contract encephalitis. They, as many, have plenty to deal with to avoid death. It is my hope that this information will encourage folks to make an impact on saving this critter. The least we can do is make effort to stop the trapping. In the meantime, I must say that learning about the pine marten has been pure pleasure for me and I hope it has been for you, as well.

