



This bulletin is produced by the collection department of the Musée de la nature et des sciences with the aim of making our objects and specimens better known to the public. These specimens are particularly interesting and are carefully preserved in the Museum's collections. They are not always presented during our various exhibitions.

## Is there a Wolverine lurking somewhere deep in the Museum?



This question is frequently asked of the personnel of the Museum. Some visitors have even remarked that they have sighted a wolverine in the wild, even here in the Estrie region of the storied Eastern Townships. This is probably a case of mistaken identity with a baby brown bear or a fisher but we have to admit that the wolverine proudly wears its mantle as the phantom-like creature we have labelled it. Rare are those who have had the opportunity to observe this mammal in the wilds of Quebec and to boast that they have accurately identified it.

The Museum already had a wolverine in its collections (photo 2), but unfortunately there was no information available to describe the specimen. It appeared to be part of an old collection that was mounted between 1930 and 1950 by Sister Marie-Jean-Eudes<sup>1</sup> for the Musée Saint-Anne de Lachine. This collection was then transferred to the Musée régional de Vaudreuil-Soulanges, and then to the Université de Montréal in 1982, where it would serve as the basis of the Musée Préfontaine. Archival documents confirm that this wolverine took its rightful place in one of the museum's glass display cases. The Musée Préfontaine closed its doors in 1993 and, two years later, donated this important collection to the Musée du Séminaire de Sherbrooke, today the Musée de la nature et des sciences.

<sup>1</sup> Sister Marie-Jean-Eudes (Marie-Bernadette Tellier) (1897-1978). A trained botanist from école de Marie-Victorin, she was a pioneer in the study of the natural sciences in Quebec. From 1942 to 1972, she breathed life and vision for a natural sciences vocation at Musée Sainte-Anne.

Photo 1 - Wolverine (*Gulo gulo*), Musée de la nature et des sciences, 2009.110

**The nature and sciences museum acquired this wolverine specimen in 2009 after it had been legally trapped in British Columbia. It is part of the museum's policy to acquire species whose origins are well documented.**

### From east to west, with very little in common

Although not all authors agree, it is recognized that there are two sub-species of wolverine in the world, one found in Eurasia (*Gulo gulo gulo*), the other in North America (*Gulo gulo luscus*). In Canada, we also distinguish two populations which are separated geographically. The eastern version is spread across Quebec and Labrador, while the western territory includes northwest Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia and the Northwest Territories and Yukon.

In Quebec, the limited presence of the wolverine is alarming enough for it to be designated "threatened" under the Act respecting threatened or vulnerable species in Quebec. On the federal side of things, the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) considers them as endangered in the east and of "special concern" in the west. However trapping is still permitted in certain western Canadian provinces where the wolverine is still considered to be abundant.



## Appearances can be misleading

While the wolverine belongs to the mustelidae family (commonly known as the weasel family) which are generally long and slender like the weasel and the marten, it is noticeably short and plumpish like a bear. The wolverine has a pale facial mask and dark brown fur which was prized by North American Indians because frost does not adhere to it. At the back of its neck, two pale yellow stripes begin and they continue on each flank to eventually reach its long bushy tail. Its chest and throat frequently have blotches of white and orange markings. Its front paws, chest or toes, as is the case for the specimen in our collection, may even reveal some white.

Despite its somewhat rotund unprepossessing appearance, the wolverine would make most marathon runners pale in comparison. To obtain its food supply, it may have to travel some 40 km per day over a territory which ranges from 100 km<sup>2</sup> for the female, to more than 1000 km<sup>2</sup> for the male. This daily exploit, combined with a relatively low population rate, makes it quite a feat to even have the opportunity to observe this mythical animal.

## An not-so-savoury reputation... and yet!

Because it is very rarely observed, the wolverine is now shrouded in mystery, so much so that it has stimulated the human imagination. Several legends exaggerating its voracity have probably helped tarnish its reputation, condemning it in the process to abusive hunting practices. The name wolverine comes from the Montagnais word, *kuekwatsheu*, pronounced *KWEKKA'DJEW*. The Micmacs call it the *OUE-SOU-ME*, which means "evil genius". In Quebec we also refer to it in French as *glouton*. This magnificent animal however is no more glutinous than any other specie, but less selective and particularly crafty in seeking its subsistence in such sources as traps, food caches or even isolated cottages.

In the minds of some of the communities which coexist with the wolverine, the latter incarnates an evil which must be eliminated. In the French television documentary entitled *Gulo gulo... Rendez-vous avec le diable* (Rendez-vous with the devil), the story is told that Father Arnaud, an oblate priest and missionary attending to the spiritual needs of the north shore Montagnais (1849-1911), in his infinite wisdom, prayed for the wolverine to disappear from the territory. Following this invocation, the First Nations people of Betsiamites never again saw a wolverine in this region.

Despite abusive and relentless stalking, the decline of the wolverine population in Quebec and Labrador is attributable to a host of factors including the trapping and hunting that took place during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the disappearance of the caribou during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the encroachment on its habitat to support human activity. The decrease in the wolf population could also have played a role in the wolverine's disappearance. While the latter is able to hunt, it prefers to enjoy the remains of what these superior hunters have left behind. If this role of carrion-eater seems to be less exalted, it provides a valuable service in the ecosystem. In acting this way, the necrophiliac cleans its environment by ridding it of the corpses of dead animals. However the wolverine does not make a difference between an abandoned carcass and the spoils of the trapper or hunter. In addition to stealing the fruits of their labour, it has the habit of urinating on



Photo 2 - Wolverine (*Gulo gulo*), Musée de la nature et des sciences, 1995.1718.16

**The taxidermists of the day frequently showed the wolverines with a ferocious air, fuelling the unfavourable perception of the animal.**

its meal to mark its presence, making the meat unfit for human consumption in the process and creating an image of itself as a vicious creature in the process.

## Where does it hide?

While the wolverine's preferred habitat is the coniferous forest, its presence on a given territory appears to be dictated by the availability of food rather than the habitat itself. The chances of running into a wolverine in Quebec are greater in the northern regions where large herds of caribou are still present.

Before the arrival of the Europeans, the wolverine was present throughout Labrador and Quebec. Currently the census taking of this species in Quebec shows it is difficult to pinpoint. In 2006, in an aerial inventory of the natural province of the Abitibi and James Bay lowlands, carried out by the organization Carcajou Québec, two trail networks were detected, confirming its presence in this region of Quebec. However, the weak density of individuals probably prevents much of an increase in the species. In addition, the weak reproduction potential of the wolverine combined with a high juvenile mortality rate decreases the chances of seeing the wolverine population of Quebec increase on its own.

# Curator's Notes



INFORMATION BULLETIN ON THE COLLECTIONS OF SHERBROOKE'S MUSÉE DE LA NATURE ET DES SCIENCES

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## What does the future hold for the wolverine?

Certain steps are planned, including the release of individuals into the wild in some regions of Quebec. This might help re-establish a viable population in the province. For the moment, we can hope that we will meet (at a healthy distance of course!) this enigmatic mammal on Quebec soil. At least the Museum is proud to conserve its two valued specimens which, let us hope, bear witness to past populations and not of the existence of a legendary animal which has disappeared.

### How to refer to our bulletin

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## COMPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

**Accession number:** 2009.110

**Date of acquisition:** September 8, 2009

**Latin name:** *Gulo gulo*

**French vernacular name:** Carcajou

**English vernacular name:** Wolverine

**Date of collection:** 2009

**Place of collection:** British Columbia

**Sex:** Male

**Age:** Adult

**Taxidermist:** Denis D'Amours, Cap-Saint-Ignace

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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