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Wild Evergreen: The Elusive Pine Marten – Evergreen Audubon

3-4 minutes



Photo by Marilyn Rhodes

Pine martens belong to the weasel family but are larger than weasels, do not have the webbed toes of the mink and are smaller than the fisher. The scientific name is “*Martes americana*” and they are found primarily in mature, northern forests.

These animals are closely associated with lodgepole pine, Douglas fir, spruce and mixed hardwood forests. They tend to be found in structurally complex, mature forests, and can occur at all elevations where such habitat exists.

At maturity male pine martens are about two feet long, sporting an eight-inch tail, and they weigh about one-and-a-half pounds.

Females tend to be 10 percent to 20 percent smaller than males,

and weigh less than a pound.

Martens have luxurious fur, which varies in coloration from dark brown to pale gray, with pale yellowish-brown fur on their undersides, and light breast patches of varying shapes.

Although they vary in coloration, there is no seasonal variation. To keep warm during the winter, pine martens burrow into the snow. They even have fur on the soles of their feet to keep them warm and that serve like snowshoes in the winter.

In the coldest weather they may den in a tree hole or chickadee nest.

Pine martens are mostly nocturnal, but when they are hungry they are active day or night, and year round. Martens are fast and agile. They can be seen leaping from tree to tree.

They also forage along the ground poking their heads into rock piles, hollow logs, crevices and holes in search of prey.

They are opportunistic predators, and will eat what is available. They require about 80 cal/day while at rest, which is equivalent to about three voles, one of their preferred foods.

They can also prey on birds and fish. Their summer diet contains vegetation, insects, conifer seeds, worms, eggs and even berries.

Pine martens may be important seed dispersers as seeds generally pass through intact, and can then germinate.

Martens are generally solitary except during the breeding season in July or August. The female will mate with various males and may have multiple periods of heat.

Females give birth in late March or April to a litter of 1 to 5 kits. The kits' eyes open after about six weeks, weaning occurs at 42 days, and kits reach adult body weight at around three months.

Pine marten scat is most commonly seen along fallen logs or rock piles. The droppings are about 5 to 6 inches long, containing bits of nuts and berries. Their footprints are about 2 inches wide and have five toe pads around a rounded heel pad.

Pine martens are vulnerable to predation from raptors and other carnivores but their main predator is man.

Condensed from articles written by Breckenridge resident Dr. Joanne Stolen who is retired from teaching microbiology at Rutgers University and has taught classes at Colorado Mountain College. She is now pursuing a career in art, specializing in nature and many of the animals she writes about. Her work can be seen locally.