

The Wayback Machine - <https://web.archive.org/web/20080310012106/http://www.sacbee.com:80/1...>



The Web Site of The Sacramento Bee

This story is taken from [Sacbee](#) / [News](#).

Elusive wolverine makes its first Sierra appearance in years

By Tom Knudson - tknudson@sacbee.com

Published 12:00 am PST Wednesday, March 5, 2008

TRUCKEE – The high school mascot in this mountain town may be the wolverine, but none of the students has ever spotted one of the elusive forest carnivores, known for their voraciousness and distaste for civilization.

Even scientists who have looked far and wide, tromping almost the entire span of the Sierra Nevada from Mount Whitney in the south to Mount Lassen up north – have found nothing. The last confirmed Sierra wolverine was shot as a scientific specimen in 1922.

Last year, a team of scientists reported that the wolverine – a chocolate-brown weasel the size of a border collie but as vicious as a grizzly bear – had apparently vanished from the Sierra long ago, squeezed out by human activity.

Now one has been found in the Tahoe National Forest north of Truckee. The sighting, captured by a graduate student's remote control camera at a rustic field station, could have widespread implications for future land-use decisions ranging from logging to ski-resort expansion in the fast-growing Truckee region.

Coincidentally, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is currently reviewing whether to place the wolverine on the endangered species list – a decision that could lead to a new round of spotted owl-style development conflicts.

Potential controversy aside, the discovery was greeted with enthusiasm around Truckee.

"Oh my goodness! That is so exciting," said Susan Lowder, a chemistry and physics teacher at Truckee High School. "So when are the grizzlies coming back? And the wolves?"

Ray Butler, a member of the Nevada County Fish and Wildlife Commission who lives in Truckee, was thrilled, too. "I'm going to have a single malt tonight," Butler said. "Other than a saber-toothed cat, this is about as good as it will ever get in California nowadays."

William Zielinski, a research ecologist with the Forest Service's Pacific Southwest Field Research Station and a forest carnivore specialist, said there's little doubt the animal in the photo is a wolverine. Beyond that, not much else is known.

Scientists aren't sure, Zielinski explained, whether the animal is a bona fide Sierra Nevada native or a long-distance migrant that wandered in from the North Cascades in Washington or the Sawtooths in northern Idaho – its two closest home ranges. Another possibility, although slim, is that someone may have released a captive wolverine into the wild.

"Nobody knows of any captive wolverines in the California area," Zielinski said. Some animals, though, are kept as captives for photography and other purposes in Canada and the Pacific Northwest. "It would have been a pretty unusual and diabolical event to have someone travel a great distance with a wolverine and release it," Zielinski said.

The discovery came about by accident. The researcher, Katie Moriarty, a graduate student at Oregon State University, wasn't looking for wolverines. She was studying martens, a slender brown weasel

fond of old-growth forests, at the Sagehen Creek Field Station between Truckee and Sierraville, just west of Highway 89.

The work – part of a master's degree thesis – was going well, according to Zielinski, who was supervising Moriarty's project from his office in Arcata. By baiting locations with raw chicken and positioning a motion-detecting digital camera nearby, Moriarty was capturing a diverse gallery of Sierra wildlife, including martens, a spotted skunk, bobcat and black bear.

Then Sunday morning at 7:15, the phone rang at Zielinski's home. It was Moriarty, her voice trembling. "Bill," she said. "Check your e-mail. Just check your e-mail."

Alarmed, Zielinski sat down at his computer. "I was really frightened because she doesn't call me at home much at all," he said.

He logged on, called up Moriarty's e-mail and opened the attachment. There was a healthy-looking wolverine with an almond colored stripe, caught by the camera from behind, digging into the snow for a scrap of chicken.

It is the first known photo of a wolverine in the Sierra Nevada – ever.

"I was flabbergasted," Zielinski said. "I just could not believe what I was seeing."

Reached by e-mail late Tuesday afternoon at the Sagehen facility, Moriarty said that when she first glimpsed the digital image, she tried not to jump to conclusions.

"I stared at the photo for a long time, running through every animal I thought it could be. And I couldn't think of anything but this," she wrote. "So I called Bill immediately and asked him what he thought. Things just got crazy from there."

Tom Kucera, a wildlife biologist who is among those who searched in vain for wolverines, called the discovery "the best news I've heard in a long time. Everybody is speechless. People are stunned."

To many scientists, one surprise is that the animal was found north of Truckee, a region that while rugged, is not wilderness. The area has been logged previously and is used by snowmobilers and cross-country skiers.

Historically, most wolverines had been spotted in the high, wild southern Sierra – part of a population that may no longer exist.

Zielinski and others wonder if the Sagehen wolverine is a remnant of that southern population that wandered north and remained undetected until now. To find out, they hope to capture a bit of its fur, compare the DNA with museum samples and solve that part of the mystery.

However Butler, the Nevada County wildlife commissioner, said he was not at all surprised that the animal turned up at Sagehen. A decade and a half ago, he claimed, another was sighted in the area.

"The old agriculture commissioner for Nevada County called me on the phone," he said. "He was going up to the Euer Ranch, one basin south of Sagehen. And he was just ecstatic. He said he had seen a wolverine. He said, 'There's no question in my mind, Ray, it was a wolverine.' "

Although the existence of a wolverine and its need for a vast home range could complicate mountain development around Truckee, just what its impact might be is anyone's guess.

A tone of concern about those unknowns crept into the e-mail message Zielinski distributed widely Monday, announcing the discovery.

"Dear Agency Friends and Research Colleagues: It is with a mixture of joy, and some trepidation, that I share the attached photograph and solicit your help in managing the circumstances it may precipitate," he wrote.

Butler noted that "consultants have routinely failed to see the wolverine as a planning issue in the Sierra for many years because of the absence of hard data."

Just how Forest Service managers in California might respond remains uncertain. According to Tahoe National Forest public affairs officer Ann Westling, officials in the agency's Washington, D.C., headquarters told her not to comment about the wolverine.

One thing is certain: The stakes are high – for man and beast.

"How do you manage for wolverines?" asked biologist Kucera. "They are the quintessential wild beast. They need huge home ranges. What does that mean for California? There is going to be a lot of head-scratching, a lot of discussion."

Go to: [Sacbee](#) / [Back to story](#)

This article is protected by copyright and should not be printed or distributed for anything except personal use.
The Sacramento Bee, 2100 Q St., P.O. Box 15779, Sacramento, CA 95852
Phone: (916) 321-1000

[Copyright](#) © [The Sacramento Bee](#)