



Time for Nature



Tracking the elusive wolverine

A model of cooperation in Vuntut National Park of Canada

Legendary as a fierce and fearless fighter, the elusive wolverine is nonetheless vulnerable. Across Canada, its numbers are declining. In many areas, wolverines have been extirpated. And even in western Canada, the species is of special concern. There simply aren't many of them on the landscape at the best of times.



In Vuntut National Park of Canada, however, there is good news. The wolverine is doing well. Parks Canada and the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation are working together to keep the population healthy.

The wolverine has been extirpated in eastern Canada and is designated special concern in Western Canada. © Parks Canada, Lynch, W., 1983.

Wolverines need wilderness

Wilderness areas like Vuntut are vital for the species. The wolverine needs vast, undisturbed territory to have a good chance of survival. If the wolverine population declines due to pressure from human or other factors, it will take a long time to recover. Not only are the animals scarce, but they also reproduce relatively slowly.

A challenge for resource managers

Despite its vulnerability, wolverines are among the least studied Canadian mammal species. They are difficult to study because they are so scarce and solitary, and their range is large. Yet park managers require good science-based information about wolverines to guide their conservation.



The Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation also has good reasons to monitor the species. The Gwitchin have an exclusive right to hunt in Vuntut National Park. They want to keep track of wolverines and other furbearers.

Wilderness areas like Vuntut are vital for wolverines, which need vast, undisturbed territory to have a good chance of survival. © Parks Canada, MacNeil, I.K., 1977.

On the wolverines' trail

Working together, the Vuntut Gwitchin and Parks Canada have undertaken an ambitious study of the status and ecology of the wolverine at Vuntut. Researchers are tracking wolverines in winter -- both on the ground and by airplane. They are collecting



carcasses. And they are documenting Vuntut Gwitchin traditional knowledge, and also recording first-hand observations of wolverine food habits, habitat use and behaviour.

Food for hunters and for wolverines

Vuntut Gwitchin members have been using their traditional skills to travel in the Old Crow Flats, where they monitor animal tracks along the wolverines' major winter travel routes. They have found consistently high wolverine track counts. This suggests that there is a healthy population of wolverines in the area.



Aerial surveys carried out during March 2004 documented 9.6 wolverines per 1000 square kilometres, a very high density for the species.

Vuntut Gwitchin members have been tracking wolverines along their major winter travel routes.
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The study is also providing insight into the relationships among wolverines, wolves, human hunters and the Porcupine caribou herd. The caribou are hunted both by wolves and human hunters.

The hunters, whether wolves or humans, leave behind remains. These remains are emerging as an important winter food source for wolverines. Because the Gwitchin have hunted in Vuntut for hundreds of years, this four-way relationship among people and wildlife is probably a long-established feature of the park's ecology.

This study information will provide an important benchmark. It will help Parks Canada to monitor the health of Vuntut's wolverine population for decades to come.

For more information visit www.pc.gc.ca/vuntut