

## OTHER THOUGHTS

# Speaking in defence of the fearsome fisher



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URBAN LIFE

For years, I'd heard the stories — they're fearsome creatures who kill more than they can eat just for the fun of it. They lurk in the shadows, stalking your pet in order to make it their next meal.

Their blood-curdling call sounds

like a human scream.

Then, I finally came face to face with one while biking on the outskirts of the Greenbelt about a week ago.

The slender animal, which looked like an oversized ferret, bounced goofily across the street from one patch of

forest to another while its brownish-black coat glistened in the sun.

At last. I'd seen the elusive fisher and, to be honest, it wasn't all that daunting of an animal.

It did pique my curiosity to find out more about the creature that, for 50 years, was virtually absent from the area and is now making a resurgence.

Scott Smithers, an area biologist with the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR), has been studying the fisher population in and around the Ottawa area for the last 10 years.

"There's a fear in Eastern Ontario of fishers like they're the Tasmanian Devil," he said. "It's unfortunate because there's really nothing to be afraid of."

They don't, it turns out, kill more than they can eat. They don't stalk your pet and they don't have calls like human screams, contrary to local lore.

The third-largest member of the weasel family, fishers grow to 15 pounds and measure as much as four feet long (much of which is their tail) — hardly a hulking beast.

They were scarce in the area 50 years ago due to clear-cutting and a lack of small mammals, which serve as their main prey, Smithers said.

Recently, local fisher populations have rebounded thanks to the regeneration of farm fields, second-growth forests and an abundance of food.

Contrary to popular belief, Smithers says OMNR didn't reintroduce any fishers to the area.

Doing genetic work on trapped fishers led to one of the most surprising finds in his research — they'd been emigrating here from Algonquin Park and the Adirondacks to repopulate the area.

"No one knew," he said.

Although he doesn't have specific numbers, Smithers says the local fisher population has lev-

elled off and remained constant over the last four years.

The result is that people, like myself, are coming in contact with them more often.

"They're generally a reclusive animal," said Smithers. "Typically, fishers are nocturnal and arboreal."

He said that, like any wild animal, you should keep your distance but there's nothing to fear.

"It's not going to run at you and bite your leg," he said.

Part of the fisher's negative reputation stems from the fact that many cat owners blame disappearing felines on the misunderstood animal, and many media reports fortify that claim.

"Sometimes, it happens," Smithers admitted, adding other animals like coyotes and dogs are more likely to kill a cat.

However, he pointed out that fishers actually do much more good than harm for rural folk.

"(Fishers) provide a good rural role to control small mammals and feral cats," he said, adding an abundance of feral cats has been putting a major dent in many local bird populations.

The fisher is also one of the few animals that feed on porcupines — animals who can do major damage to trees and forests if overpopulation occurs.

Since I'm sure you're dying to know, as was I, Smithers told me the fisher attacks the porcupine's face (which has no quills) until it can flip the animal on its back and attack its stomach (which also has no quills).

They'll also eat hares, rabbits, squirrels, mice, shrews, grouse, turkeys, deer (carrion) and the odd berry.

So if you should find yourself face to face with one of these fabled animals, don't fear for your life — enjoy the moment.

— Alex Hebert appears Mondays and Tuesdays in 24 hours. Send your comments or column ideas to alex.hebert@sunmedia.ca



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services photo

**DON'T BE AFRAID?** If you see this face, don't be scared; despite their fearsome reputation, fishers aren't dangerous and actually play a helpful role in the ecosystem.