

Trapper Tracks

Evidence in snow leads to Fisher's demise

By Dick Ellis

Like any veteran trapper, Dan Virnig had no trouble reading the evidence when Fisher tracks in the snow lead to the Black Ash and the obvious brutal end of a Wisconsin porcupine. Even the quills of the prey offered little defense against the vicious hunting skills of the Fisher. Large patches of blood mingled with the porky's droppings at the hollowed out base of the ash and told the trapper that this would be the place to set his ambush.

"The fisher is a horrific carnivore," said Virnig. "It's like a wolf that climbs. Several years ago I caught a large fisher that was the only one I've ever trapped with quills in its face."

Fishers inhabited Wisconsin at about 1900 but were extirpated here by 1920 due to habitat loss from agriculture, logging, fire and over-trapping according to this reporter's file notes. Following 20 to 40 years with no fishers in Wisconsin, the mammal was reintroduced in the 1950s and 60s with releases of 150 fishers in both Clam Lake and Eagle River by the Department of Natural Resources, UW-Stevens Point and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

According to Virnig and internet sources, the beautiful animal requires extensive, uninterrupted wilderness to thrive. As a tenacious carnivore that



Wisconsin trapper Dan Virnig followed these fisher tracks for a half day before successfully placing his trap near a black ash tree where the predator had killed a porcupine. The fisher weighed 18 pounds (Ellis)

also feeds on mice, squirrels, snowshoe hares, rabbits, birds, shrews and deer carcasses, fishers were in large part reintroduced to keep in check the porcupine population raising havoc on the timber industry by debarking and killing trees. Fast and agile, fishers are believed to leap from tree to tree in pursuit of squirrels.

Wisconsin trappers hoping for a fisher permit often most wait, depending on which of six zones they wish to

target, to receive a coveted tag. Virnig, trapping near Phillips in Price County, usually can expect a permit every other year and then waits until near the end of the season when fur is prime and more valuable before intensifying his efforts to fill the tag.

"Otherwise, you're just trapping the animal to kill it," he said.

Starting in 1997, according to DNR trapping regulations, the state implemented a preference system assuring



Wisconsin trapper Dan Virnig of Phillips in Price County tagged this 45 inch, 18 pound fisher after tracking the animal and finding a black ash where the predator had killed a porcupine. (Ellis)

that all applicants “receive equity” in drawing permits. The fisher population had grown rapidly in the northern one-third of Wisconsin in the 1980s. Increased harvest rates slowed or stabilized the fisher’s population growth in the 1990s, when fall population estimates were about 10,000 animals, or about 16 percent above stated population goals of 9,200.

Fisher harvest numbers from 2003 to 2008 were generally below the recommended quota, allowing the statewide population to increase to 15,000 by the fall of 2009. The recommended quota this season was 2,200, with the DNR furbearing advisory committee recommending a harvest of 600 fishers in Zone A, 500 in B, 400 in C, 350 in D, 200 in E and 150 in F.

Although an opportunistic feeder and relatively easy to trap, fishers are not always abundant in this rugged country near Phillips in Price County. Lack of Fisher sign, even during some seasons with an abundance of snowshoe hares and grouse as prey in this beautiful pocket of Wisconsin, has sometimes been the unwelcome reality.

During past seasons, Virnig has

spots proves futile in this 2009-10 season, he spends much of the day following tracks until he finds the cedar tree marked with the tracks of the fisher, and then the black ash with the obvious signs of the recent porcupine kill.

It is obvious from Virnig’s discovery at the Black Ash, that introducing the fisher to keep the porcupine in check was not just a guess by wildlife managers. According to Tane Crossley on the internet reprinted by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Bureau of Wildlife Management, a fisher will attack the face of the porcupine until the prey is too weak to defend itself, then flip the porcupine over to attack its vulnerable belly.

“I found the fisher tracks and spent a half-day following them until I found the cedar tree it was using and then the black ash tree with the porcupine droppings and blood,”

successfully trapped Fisher in a lowland cedar swamp with a carefully set and camouflaged conibear body grip 220 trap. If a fisher does fall for Virnig’s enticement of liquid muskrat bait, it will hopefully trip the offset trigger and be dispatched quickly with a blow behind the head.

Like most trappers, Virnig is keenly observant; an excellent hunter seeking an advantage. When trapping old reliable


Virnig said. “About 10 yards from the tree, I used a Cubby-Set, 220 body-grip trap with a fisher lure with a strong skunk scent. A lot of trappers will set a fisher trap right in the tree.”

The trap is designed to trip when animal’s shoulders set off a blow to the head. Virnig’s season, which began in earnest December 1st, ended with a quick kill on December 28. The male Fisher was 45 inches long and weighed 18 pounds, the exact length and weight as the Fisher trapped years before with quills in its face. Virnig now will most likely wait a year or two before he is again issued a tag to target fishers. It’s not a big concern for the northern Wisconsin owner of Birch Island Resort.

He’s already spent most of January chasing Price County Fox.

Contact Information:

Dan and Holly Virnig own and operate Birch Island Resort including three two-bedroom cabins, bar and restaurant on Wilson Lake, a Class A musky lake on the Phillips Chain of Lakes. Dan guides for one or two bear or deer hunts per year on private land. Contact them at 1-715-339-3151.

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This black ash tree shows the droppings of a porcupine and blood where a fisher had killed the porky. Eventually, the Wisconsin trapper used this evidence to successfully trap the fisher in Price County. (Ellis)