

A husband-and-wife team in Montana studies the elusive wolverine

Steve Gehman and Betsy Robinson brave frostbite, avalanches, and bears to track the imperiled animal in the northern Rockies.

By [Todd Wilkinson](#) | Correspondent of *The Christian Science Monitor* / May 20, 2008 edition

Reporter Todd Wilkinson discusses an old fashioned approach to wolverine conservation.

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Betsy Robinson and her husband, Steve Gehman, hunch over a zagging line of paw prints. On this bracing morning in the northern Rockies, the couple raced at first light to the end of a dirt road near Bozeman, Mont., strapped on snowshoes, and went sleuthing for a set of animal tracks supposedly spotted by a cross-country skier the day before.

Now windblown and contorted, the prints twist through a clot of underbrush and ascend up a steep slope. The identity of the animal is difficult to discern from the tracks. Huffing for miles in pursuit, Ms. Robinson and Mr. Gehman finally conclude they were not blazed by a wolverine – their desired suspect – but by a wandering mountain lion. “There are worse ways of being disappointed,” Gehman says, flashing a smile. “Trailing a cougar instead of a wolverine is still a pretty good reason to get outdoors.”

As two of the nation’s foremost independent researchers on one of the animal kingdom’s most elusive creatures, Robinson and Gehman often spend days like this – making a quick expedition into the woods to check out tips that end up either being real or fanciful.

Their method of research is old-fashioned. No radio collars. No tracking the animals from the air. The duo simply do it with boot leather and remote-camera clicks. It is certainly not your typical cubicle job. In their quest to study the wolverine, the pair has dodged avalanches, camped out in 30-degrees-below-zero weather, been surrounded at night by grizzlies and wolves, and gotten lost in whiteout conditions.

Through it all, they have helped amass what little information there is on such species as the endangered Canada lynx, the fisher, and the pine marten but most notably on the imperiled wolverine – an often misunderstood animal that ignites debate across the West about how much it should be protected.

“If Betsy and Steve weren’t out there, we would know far less about these species,” says Marion Cherry, a senior wildlife biologist with the Gallatin National Forest. “As it is, our understanding of them is pretty limited because historically we haven’t devoted a lot of attention to them.”

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With his long beard, Gehman looks as if he could be a member of the band ZZ Top. But the garb that he and Robinson wear – classic Patagonia fleece and lycra – let you know that they’re not playing electric guitars. They spend much of their time in the Gallatin National Forest on the northern edge of Yellowstone National Park. It is part of a rugged belt of federal and state lands along the borders of Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, and Washington that represents the last major stronghold of wolverines in the Lower 48.

Through their private nonprofit research firm, Wild Things Unlimited, Robinson and Gehman run one of only four wolverine research projects in the country. To support their work, they occasionally take “citizen scientists” who want to experience research firsthand on guided adventures.

They stretch their shoestring budget by using a network of remote-controlled cameras that have chronicled some remarkable wildlife sightings. The cameras, fitted with motion sensors, are mounted discreetly on trees near carcasses and automatically take pictures when animals lope through the area.

Gehman and Robinson prefer to use techniques that don’t harass the animal, eschewing, for instance, sedatives to capture wolverines. Instead, they employ a device that snares animal hair without the predators knowing it. The samples are sent in for DNA analysis.

The wolverine is thought by most people to be vicious – a snarling Dick Butkus of the woods. In fact, that’s not true, the duo says. They describe wolverines as wonderfully elusive but hardy, making their living in places too hostile for most other species.

Weighing up to 40 pounds, wolverines are the largest members of the weasel family. They thrive in solitude and isolation from humans. A single breeding pair may have a home range that covers hundreds of square miles. “It’s a pretty hard life if you are a wolverine trying to survive in the mountains in the dead of winter,” says Gehman. “There’s no trudging to the drive-up window at McDonald’s and ordering a Quarter Pounder to feed you and the kids.”

US Fish and Wildlife officials estimate about 500 wolverines exist in the northern Rockies, which are believed to be connected to populations in Canada. Government scientists like Brian Giddings, with the Montana department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks, thinks the population is relatively stable – and rebounding from historical lows documented a century ago.

These views were buttressed earlier this past winter when a graduate student in California, using a remote camera to find weasels in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, captured an unexpected glimpse of a wolverine. The animal was thought to have vanished from the state years ago.

Yet environmentalists hardly think one wolverine constitutes a turnaround. They believe the government's estimate of 500 animals is high and see the population in decline. Further, they contend that the groups of wolverines that do exist are not connected, making them more vulnerable to trappers and human encroachment.

In March, the US Fish and Wildlife Service decided that wolverines in the Lower 48 did not warrant elevation to endangered status. Environmental groups vow to continue to push for greater protection in the courts. "When in doubt, we believe the Fish and Wildlife Service should err on the side of caution instead of staking out the most optimistic conclusion," says

Timothy Preso, a lawyer with Earthjustice. "In other areas of the West, that kind of thinking resulted in wolverines and lynx disappearing before anyone realized they were gone."

Even though they try to stay out of the political fray and just provide information for wildlife managers, Robinson and Gehman find it hard to stay neutral on all issues. "I know it sounds absurd, but for the price a trapper can get for a wolverine pelt in Montana – about \$350 – a consequence can be the complete elimination of wolverines from an entire mountain range like the Bridgers, where they have been for centuries," Robinson says.

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Searching for wolverines can be like watching geologic time pass. The two researchers once spent three years trying to find a single wolverine track in the Big Belt Mountains of Montana. No luck. "When we happen upon a wolverine track, it is like striking gold," Robinson says.

In the past 11 years, Robinson and Gehman have spent hundreds of frigid winter days on snowshoes. They have compiled a log of track locations, GPS points, and insights that they have shared with other researchers.

The duo trek wherever wolverine and lynx do – often through dangerous avalanche chutes better suited to daring mountaineers. Typically, they head into the woods for a week, but have spent as long as a month. They've struggled through blizzards and frostbite. They've had wolf packs howl around their tent at night.

Before his current job, Gehman was a member of the Grizzly Bear Study team in Yellowstone National Park. The couple met on a "citizen science" research mission he was leading in the early 1990s. The two do embrace the elements. Their "office," after all, is the great outdoors, often lit by the northern lights. Their work "mates" are bruins, wolves, elk, bison, coyotes, and the occasional wolverine – an outdoor theater similar to one that greeted the explorers two centuries ago.

"I am fascinated by the issue of rarity in wildlife populations, and wolverines historically have been understudied," says Gehman. "Yet their mystique is larger than life."

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1.Larry Thorngren | 05.20.08

What a pleasant surprise to read about non-intrusive wildlife research that doesn't involve helicopter chases , drugs and radio-collars. Yellowstone Park biologists should be required to read this article.

2.Studying the Wolverine « Ralph Maughan's Wildlife News | 05.21.08

[...] A husband-and-wife team in Montana studies the elusive wolverine - Christian Science Monitor Posted in Wildlife Habitat. Tags: wolverine. [...]

3.jerry | 05.21.08

Less than 500 remain in the lower 48 and Montana still allows trapping them.(The only state that does outside Alaska). Mr Giddings of MFWP, a trapper himself, continues to support the trapping. It's shameful.

4.Kate | 05.22.08

I agree with both comments; I've lived in Montana for a few years now, and though there are plenty of informed, intelligent people here, somehow they get overshadowed by people whose thinking is shamefully myopic and shortsighted. However, these people who clamor for their "right" to trap animals are supported by Bush appointees across the board, who crush any opposing opinions.