



# Meet the



# Marten

By Paul Jensen

**New York's marten population must be closely monitored and carefully managed.**

# I

It's mid-winter in the southwestern Adirondacks. Our convoy slowly snakes its way along an old logging road near the West Canada Lake Wilderness Area. The anticipation of what awaits us makes it feel like Christmas Eve.

Passing through open hardwood ridges and thick stands of spruce, our progress is hampered by the deep snow, the result of lake-effect storms that sweep across Lake Ontario, sometimes dumping several feet of snow at once. As we near our destination, it's not a gift we seek, but rather a small carnivore in the weasel family—the American marten (*Martes americana*). It's our hope to capture and fit radio-collars on a few of these secretive creatures to learn more about their habits.

We leave our sleds behind and plow through knee-deep, powdery snow. Approaching one of several live-traps, the pungent smell of our skunk-based lure assaults our nostrils. Moving closer, our excitement mounts as we are greeted by a low growl. We have successfully captured our first marten.

As I brush away the snow covering the entrance of the plywood box that houses our live-trap, the marten, a young male, continues to vocalize his displeasure via a series of low growls and hisses. Enticed to this location by the lure we hung on a nearby tree, as well as by the succulent sardines topped with raspberry jelly placed inside the trap, he's surely regretting his decision to go after an easy meal. I carefully remove the trap from the box to get a closer look. It's exciting to see an animal whose secretive nature keeps it hidden from most people's view.



Handling a live marten is a rare opportunity afforded few north country researchers.

Staring back at us from inside the box trap is a long slender marten, with thick orange-brown fur, a dark tail, furry feet, large ears, and distinctive, small, black weasel eyes. I name him Louie in honor of the legendary French Louie—a fitting name for this icon of the northern forest.

To minimize the marten’s stress, our team works quickly. We use a specialized handling cone to remove the animal from the trap and then administer immobilizing drugs so that we can safely handle him. We collect standard biological data: weight, length, and other physical measurements, and attach ear tags and a small radio-collar (about half the size of an AA battery) that will enable us to find this marten over the course of a year. With these data, we’ll be able to estimate the animal’s home range and better understand its use of habitat types.

We have only about 10 minutes to complete the entire process before the animal begins to recover from the effects of the drugs. We make one final check of the data, ensure

that the radio-collar is functioning properly, and place the animal back in the trap to fully recover.

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After about an hour, we release Louie and watch in amazement as he easily navigates the deep snow and quickly disappears out of sight. To our great satisfaction, this scene played out multiple times during the first year of our study, as we continued our trapping through early April.

American martens (formerly known as pine martens) once ranged throughout New York and the northeastern U.S., when unbroken forests dominated the northeastern landscape. Marten populations declined substantially throughout the northeastern U.S.

during the late 1800s and early 1900s, primarily due to habitat loss caused by intensive logging and overharvesting by trappers before trapping was regulated.

In 1936, New York closed the marten trapping season. Over the next 42 years, martens re-occupied much of their former Adirondack range—a testament to the resiliency of wildlife populations and natural systems, remoteness and inaccessibility of the Adirondacks, and the emerging science of wildlife management.

In 1978, the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) reopened the marten trapping season in a limited area of the High Peaks region. This move restored the rich tradition and history of trapping in the Adirondacks, made famous by woodsmen like French Louie who roamed far and wide in the wilds of West Canada country in search of game. This season also marked the beginning of scientific studies designed to investigate the natural history and population status of this intriguing mammal. For the last thirty years, New York trappers have provided biological data critical to our understanding and management of this species.

To that end, DEC staff recently began a four-year study to learn



The American marten is found throughout much of the Adirondacks (martens are common in the dark green area and also occur in the lighter green area).

more about the distribution and habitat use of Adirondack martens. Using remote trail cameras triggered by a combination of motion and an animal's body heat, we are documenting the presence of marten and other carnivores. In addition to marten, we've photographed fisher, mink, weasel, bobcat, fox, coyote, and black bear. This study has taken DEC staff to some of the wildest and most remote areas in the Adirondacks, including the Five Ponds Wilderness Area, Pigeon Lake Wilderness Area, and the High Peaks.

Early in this effort, we enlisted the aid of several area trappers

for advice on appropriate baits and lures, and benefit from their considerable knowledge of marten natural history. Their assistance has paid big rewards, increasing our catch rates and improving efficiency of the study.

Prior research indicated that martens prefer mature coniferous forest stands. Our preliminary results suggest that martens use a wide range of forest stand types in the Adirondacks, including those that are predominantly deciduous. Martens now occupy an area of about 5,300 square miles in the Adirondack Mountains. Although they are carnivores, feeding largely on red squirrels and small mam-

mals, martens eat a wide variety of food, including berries.

Smaller cousins of the more widespread fisher, adult marten are about two feet long, and weigh about 1½ to 2 pounds on average. They are chiefly nocturnal, and den in hollow trees or logs.

At the end of our first field season, we learned that Louie had "slipped" his collar (a fairly common occurrence with martens). While this was frustrating news, I look back on our first marten capture as unforgettable. The slipped collar also brings to mind a story about the real French Louie chronicled in Harvey Dunham's book, *Adirondack French Louie*.



After a marten is captured, biologists fit a battery-operated radio collar around its neck, which allows the animal to be tracked for up to a year.



On the run from the law in Maine, Louie apparently outwitted and escaped his would-be captors by crossing a river jammed with logs on their way to the mill. It would seem French Louie's spirit continues to roam these wild lands.

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Trail cameras triggered by a combination of motion and infra-red light allow biologists to document the presence of carnivores like marten, bobcat, bear and fisher.