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In search of a beast that may be gone

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By Alex Pulaski

PARKDALE -- Up talus slopes and through streams, Leslie HaySmith and a contingent of trackers seek signs of a wide-ranging and near-invisible predator.

Trailing wolverines is like trying to lasso a hummingbird.

"You could go decades without seeing one," said Hay Smith, a wildlife biologist with the Mount Hood National Forest.

The last wolverine sighting in Oregon was in 2001. Fewer than 20 sightings have been reported in the state since 1975.

Mount Hood forest employees and volunteers began setting up remote cameras last summer in the hopes of capturing a wolverine on film. They've had no luck so far but remain convinced the animals range within Oregon's borders.

The U.S. Forest Service has listed the wolverine's status in Oregon as "sensitive," a designation afforded a handful of mammals, such as the Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep and the Pacific fisher. A "sensitive" listing does not carry the protections given to endangered or threatened species.

Five conservation groups filed suit in Montana last year to force the federal government to decide whether wolverines should be protected under the Endangered Species Act. Montana is the only state that allows the animals to be trapped for their fur.

One of the groups involved in the lawsuit estimates about 750 wolverines remain in the United States, and are concentrated in Montana, with lesser numbers believed to be in Wyoming, Idaho, Washington and Oregon.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service refused in the 1990s to list wolverines as endangered or threatened, saying not enough was known about the fierce, secretive mammals to make a decision.

Wolverines, the largest member of the weasel family, weigh about 30 pounds. They are scavengers who usually clean up after hunter-carnivores such as wolves but also bring down their own game.

Unlike bears, coyotes or wolves, they will not feast on food left by humans. A 1994 technical report by the Forest Service concluded that "wolverines appear not to tolerate land-use activities that permanently alter habitat, such as agriculture and urban and industrial development."

Adult males will range as far as 300 to 400 square miles. Females travel less, especially when they have young.

The Forest Service report concluded that with man as its chief threat, the wolverine population could best be maintained by protecting large areas and preserving travel corridors.

Whether that is likely on Mount Hood remains in question.

Mt. Hood Meadows hopes to build a destination golf and ski resort near Cooper Spur on the mountain's northeast flank. Coincidentally, the areas north and northeast of the mountain are the least developed and the most likely to harbor wolverines, biologists think.

But forest officials won't comment for now on the effects a destination resort at Cooper Spur might have on wolverines or other sensitive species. They say the resort planning process does not rest with the Forest Service. It's now in the hands of Hood River County.

Under state law, destination resorts cannot be sited in "an especially sensitive big game habitat area." The law says determination can be based on one of two foundations: a state wildlife survey conducted in 1984 or a "sensitive" finding by a local jurisdiction within its comprehensive plan.

The 1984 state survey showed no "especially sensitive" big-game habitat in Hood River County, which Mt. Hood Meadows contends should end debate. But resort opponents argue the county is free to amend its comprehensive plan to protect range area for deer and elk.

The wolverine's "sensitive" listing by the Forest Service has no bearing on the county's planning process for a destination resort. Hood River County planning commissioners have asked staff to clarify a number of wildlife issues before they meet April 9, but the wolverine's status is not among them.

HaySmith, the wildlife biologist, said the wolverine's future in Oregon probably hinges on two things: the Montana suit and the Mount Hood forest's success with photography.

Each week, forest employees and volunteer trackers from Cascadia Wild, a Portland nonprofit, trekked through the forest to check remote cameras. Camera locations are changed every five weeks. Trackers look for areas with terrain that can support a mix of game.

As many as 20 cameras are mounted in summer, but snow and remote terrain mean as few as a half-dozen are in place during winter.

Hiking to check three cameras near Laurance Lake, Cascadia Wild's Dave Shapiro and Kyle Strauss paused to examine animal droppings and scan scarce snow for paw and hoof prints.

They found elk tracks and coyote droppings, but no sign of wolverines. Approaching the first camera site, Strauss was the first to spot a receiving unit had been triggered. That was the good news.

The bad news was it registered 1,019 hits -- so many that it was almost certainly the work of birds or a wind-pushed branch that interrupted the infrared beam linked to a camera. The beam passed in front of elk or chicken meat suspended from a tree trunk.

As John Lowe, a Forest Service wildlife crew leader, noted the first several dozen dates and times the receiver was triggered, Strauss unloaded the film. The roll included only 24 frames, meaning the infrared beam was broken close to 1,000 times after the camera was out of film.

A second camera was triggered only twice, and trackers left its film in place. The receiver for the third camera showed 650 hits.

A few days after their trek, Lowe picked up the two rolls of developed film. And found. . . .

"There was nothing on them," he said. "I don't know what happened."

HaySmith likens their search to detective work, sifting for clues on the ground but not knowing whether they've collared their suspect until the next roll of film is developed.

"All it takes," HaySmith said, "is one photo."

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