
Los Angeles Times

APRIL 12, 2010

Low-profile mammal now in the environmental spotlight

Wildlife advocates have filed a lawsuit seeking legal protection for the fisher -- a weasel-like Sierra Nevada predator that kills porcupines. It qualifies as endangered but is stuck in regulatory limbo.

By Jill Leovy

By nature, the fisher keeps a low profile. Even researchers who study the speedy, weasel-like creature in California old-growth forests say they rarely see it.

But now environmentalists are forcing the shy fisher into the spotlight.

In a lawsuit filed last week, the Sierra Nevada predator is being made a poster critter for scores of rare animals stuck in what advocates say is regulatory limbo: They qualify as endangered species but remain on a waiting list.

Federal officials say a lack of resources -- and a flood of burdensome lawsuits -- have prevented them from officially listing the fisher as endangered. About 250 other plants and animals are similarly stuck.

These species often languish for years in a category the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service calls "candidate species" -- rare enough to be classified as endangered but afforded no special legal protections.

In the suit filed in federal court in San Francisco, the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity and

other environmental groups argued that California's fisher is suffering from legal neglect. Biologists estimate there may be no more than 1,500 to 4,500 of the creatures left in California, including a few hundred lurking south of Yosemite National Park.

Environmentalists acknowledge the fisher was chosen in part for public-relations reasons. Other waiting-list species are not as suited to stardom; some are so obscure they have only Latin names. By contrast, the fisher "is a neat animal," acknowledged Noah Greenwald, endangered-species program director at the Center for Biological Diversity.

A relative of the Russian sable, the fisher has a rich, velvety brown pelt once prized by fur trappers, who decimated its population. It is so swift and slinky it can catch a squirrel. Its feet rotate 180 degrees on its ankles, allowing it to zip backward and forward on tree trunks.

And it kills porcupines -- prey almost no other predator dares to hunt.

Its methods are horrifying: Fishers attack porcupines in the face, then go for their bellies, striking

so quickly that the quilled tails have no time to lash back. "It basically eats the porcupine's face off," said Reginald Barrett, a UC Berkeley biologist. "The fisher is like greased lightning."

Perhaps adding to its mystique is the fact that the fisher's name has nothing to do with angling but is likely a mispronunciation of a French name.

Federal officials use a ranking system to decide which creatures should be given endangered status. Although the fisher has waited six years to be listed, about 150 species are ahead of it.

"There is a sense of frustration that they haven't turned things around at this point," Greenwald said.