



JOHN DRISCOLL/THE TIMES-STANDARD

Researchers placed a satellite tracking collar on this Pacific fisher, captured on Green Diamond Resource Co. land, which was expected to be released on timberlands in the northern Sierra Nevada as part of a reintroduction effort. Below, a captured Pacific fisher is held by California Department of Fish and Game Associate Wildlife Veterinarian Deana Clifford, as Fish and Game environmental scientist Pete Figura looks on.

Fishing for fishers

Catch-and-release program for weasel cousin begins on local timberland

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Local timberlands have become a source for a seldom-seen predator biologists are reintroducing to the northern Sierra Nevada, where they have been extinct for decades.

As part of the second year of the project, biologists trapped a Pacific fisher on Green Diamond Resource Co. land at the Humboldt-Del Norte County line on Thursday. They are hoping to trap several more animals in the coming days, transfer them to a canyon outside of Chico and then monitor the large weasel to determine how they take hold.

Of 15 fishers trapped and relocated from the Weaverville and Yreka areas last year, 12 are still alive and all of the females have had kits, raising



hopes that the ongoing reintroduction will be successful.

"You can put them out there and they seem to be OK," said North Carolina State University researcher Aaron Facka.

While many reintroduction efforts have simply trapped and moved animals, the Pacific fisher has been considered for listing under the federal Endangered Species Act, a condition that has made the

effort more complex.

Sierra Pacific Industries has fishers on its properties in Trinity County, but until last year, they were believed to be gone from its northern Sierra Nevada tracts. It offered five potential properties where fishers might be reintroduced, and biologists settled on Butte Canyon as an area with the best possible habitat.

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The timber company forged an agreement with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to allow the reintroduction on the condition that if the fisher became federally protected, it wouldn't have to alter its operations in the area. Sierra Pacific spokesman Mark Pawlicki said that the reintroduction appears to be going well and that the fishers have taken to good habitat in the area.

"It gives us an opportunity to show that you can continue to manage forests and manage habitat for specially adapted animals like the fisher," Pawlicki said.

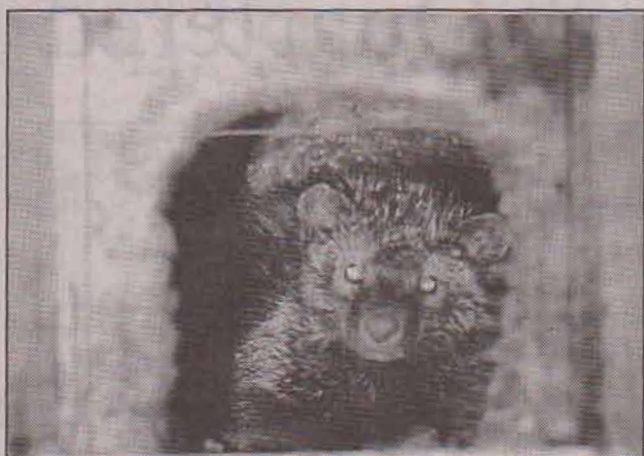
Last year, the first 15 of an expected 40 total animals were moved to the Butte Canyon area.

On Thursday, biologists gathered in Crannell on the Little River north of McKinleyville to examine the fisher caught on Green Diamond property that morning. Fishers have to be handled carefully; a member of the weasel family, they can be unpredictable and vicious when cornered.

The animal was pushed from a crate into a metal cone in which it was immobilized, then treated with anesthesia. The fisher was then laid out on a table, given oxygen from a tiny mask, and the team began to take measurements and samples.

In order to transfer an animal, it must be shown to be free of diseases like distemper and canine parvo. It also must be a mature animal in good condition, able to survive the rigors of transportation and relocation. Blood, genetic and dental samples were also taken.

The fisher trapped Thursday was an adult male, about 7 pounds. Used to handling larger fishers from inland areas, California Department of Fish and Game Associate



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A Pacific fisher stares out of a trap it triggered on Green Diamond Resource Co. property near the Humboldt-Del Norte county line on Thursday.

Wildlife Veterinarian Deana Clifford wasn't initially impressed, though as the examination continued, she gave the animal a clean bill of health.

The fisher may be lean for an inland animal, but it is average for a coastal fisher, said University of California Davis wildlife disease ecologist Mourad Gabriel.

After about 30 minutes and some focused discussion, the team determined that the fisher was a strong candidate for relocating. Facka put a satellite tracking collar on the animal as Clifford warmed and dried the animal in preparation for its recovery. The fisher would be taken to a Fish and Game facility in Anderson while biologists wait for disease tests to come back.

"They'll be cared for intensively," said Fish and Game Senior Environmental Scientist Richard Callas.

Once cleared, the animal will be released in the Butte Canyon area. The biologists are looking to continue trapping on Green Diamond property in the coming days, luring fishers to traps with a product they call Gusto — a violently foul skunk-based

attractant — and drawing them to chicken bait. Fishers are tuned to scent, and Facka and the others began to believe that brand-new traps deployed this week smelled better luck in the coming days.

The satellite collar will allow Facka to track the animals that are trapped and relocated, sending regular updates on its position by e-mail. Male fishers are known to roam large distances, he said, unlike females, which generally have a smaller territory and can be tracked using more simple radio-telemetry equipment.

The Pacific fisher has become largely extinct in much of its historic home range in California, Oregon, Washington, Montana and Idaho. Northwest California and the southern Sierra Nevada now hold the last breeding populations of the animal.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 2004, responding to a petition to put the animal on the federal endangered species list, determined the fisher warranted protection, but other species were a higher priority. In April, the Center for Biological Diversity, the Environmental Protection

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Information Center and other groups sued Fish and Wildlife, claiming the agency is illegally delaying the fisher's protection.

The Hoopa Valley Tribe and Green Diamond Resource Co. have done extensive surveys for the fisher locally, and their properties are believed to have some of the highest densities of fishers in the West, and even the United States. Green Diamond began surveys for fishers in 1994 and found they were relatively evenly distributed across its 450,000 acres, said Senior Wildlife Biologist Lowell Diller.

In 2004, however, the company found a decline in detections, as had the Hoopa Tribe in their work between 1999 and 2005. But that year, the tribe began to see fishers rebounding, and in 2006,

Green Diamond noted the same upswing, Diller said. With the numbers back up, Diller said that Fish and Game contacted the company about being a source to gather fishers for relocation.

Last year, all 15 animals that were relocated did well, despite the massive snow storms that hit the northern Sierra Nevada. They were all alive in the spring. By June, biologists confirmed three mortalities of females — one likely killed by a bobcat, another died when it fell into a water tank and the third was struck by a car.

Facka said that the team will be keeping a close eye on the fishers moved from the coast to the colder, snowy inland country where they will be released.

The larger scientific com-

munity is also watching with significant interest. Relocating animals is not without risk, and plenty of reintroduction efforts have gone bad.

Humboldt State University wildlife professor Richard Golightly said that the main question that will be answered as part of the fisher reintroduction effort is whether the habitat they are being released into is suitable. Moving a predator into an area can also have effects on prey and other species that can be detrimental, he said.

"It's really hard for anyone to forecast those consequences," Golightly said.

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