

# Study: fishers migrating, adapting to southeast

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by Natalie Ryder



*There are currently 12 fishers with GPS collars in southeastern Minnesota. A research team from the University of Minnesota-Duluth's Natural Resources Research Institute was monitoring 18 collared fishers during the previous winter, some of which died, disappeared, or their collars malfunctioned. Photo courtesy of Benjamin Wymer*

**By Natalie Ryder**

Staff Writer

Altura, Minn. — After studying fishers in northern Minnesota for several years in the early 2000s, it was a surprise to DNR Research Scientist John Erb that he and his team observed them migrating south around a decade ago.

"I never really predicted the day that fishers would interact with opossums," Erb said.

Upon further review, knowing fishers' geographic footprint historically sprawled across the state, it seems obvious to him now that the species could once again reside outside the state's northern forested zone. Because the dense, conifer-forested areas — where fishers reside in northern Minnesota — aren't as robust in the south, it raised questions for scientists and ecologists.

"I'm still a little surprised when we get photographs of fishers in somebody's woodlot," Erb said. "... You look at the landscape around the woodlot that looks like you could throw a Frisbee 24 miles without touching anything."

Even though it's been surprising to him, that doesn't mean it's been impossible for fishers to navigate the developed landscape, which is what wildlife ecologist Michael Joyce set out to study.

"They're coming back into a landscape that's very different from the one they used to exist in. There's more poultry, more agriculture. ... And they have the opportunity to interact with humans in ways that they didn't used to," said Joyce, an ecologist for the University of Minnesota-Duluth's Natural Resources Research Institute.

Joyce's southeastern fisher study is in its third year of tracking and monitoring the habits of the "cryptic" creatures as they traverse a differing landscape with fewer rickety conifer trees, more prey, and more human activity.

At the start of the three-year study, Joyce and his team were concerned they might not find any fishers in or around Whitewater Wildlife Management Area or around the Twin Cities metro.

"Oh no, what if we can't find them or we don't find enough of them to get our sample size?" he said. But he's seen "quite the opposite."

Around half of the trail cameras placed in the team's research area caught glimpses of fishers in the southeast, with around 10% of cameras catching fishers in the metro.

"That was a lot higher than we thought we were going to see," Joyce said.

However, during the second study year, the statistic flipped, with an increase in fishers in the Twin Cities and a decrease around the WMA, which furthered the team's need to continue studying the species.

Joyce said he's discovered that despite the lack of fishers' ideal habitat to use large tree cavities for nesting, they're making do with what's available. In that mode of survival, it could be leading to female fishers living in closer proximity to one another than the northern population does.

From Erb and Joyce's earlier research of the northern fisher population, female fishers carve out between 16 to 25 square kilometers of territory, while four or five females in southeast Minnesota may live in that same amount of space.

"I think the most surprising thing to us is that there appears to be a lot higher density of fishers where they exist in southern Minnesota, and so their territory size, females specifically, ... is somewhere between 5 and 6 square kilometers," Joyce said.

While male fishers in the south and north have similar domain standards, the population density of females could have implications down the line for genetic diversity and inbreeding, Joyce speculated.

Currently, his team is tracking 12 GPS-collared fishers.

Originally there were 18, but some were killed by predators, vehicles, they disappeared, or collars malfunctioned.

Among the female fishers Joyce's team has studied and tracked, they've gathered preliminary data to show higher reproduction rates in preliminary research than the northern mammals experience.

"There are lots of things we'd like to still dig into," he said.

Because they're seeing southeastern fishers needing less space, it's possible for the landscape to support a larger population of fishers in the future.

### **Southern reintroduction**

After almost being pushed to the brink of extinction in the 1900s through unregulated trapping and humans developing the landscape, it has taken a long time for the species to bounce back.

"In Minnesota, we actually never reintroduced our fishers. They came back naturally, probably because we never completely had removed them in the first place," Joyce said.

He speculates that the amount of space female fishers need to nest led to the species slowly expanding its overall territory in the state. He said that when a female's kits grow up, those females then need to carve out their own nesting space and so on, leading to expansion south.

During the past few years, Joyce has heard from residents in southeastern Minnesota who thought the DNR oversaw the species' reintroduction, to cull turkey populations.

"This is something that we've heard in northern Minnesota, too, that fishers are eating all the turkeys. But I think with a predator, you're always going to have that (possibility)," Joyce said.

However, Joyce's research shows that while fishers can occasionally kill a turkey, it isn't a common menu item for the species.

Another concern is that the fisher could view domesticated cats or dogs as prey, but Joyce has observed fishers are skittish around humans. Although, as the fisher population expands farther into Minnesota, even parts of northern Iowa, it's important to remember they are predators and could attack if threatened.

"If we have them in a trap, I certainly wouldn't stick my fingers in. They are predators, they're trying to defend themselves," Joyce said.

While humans and turkeys don't have much to fret about with the rise of the species, Joyce's team is still working to understand how fishers are changing the landscape, if at all.

"I think we're really trying, and will continue to try, to learn what that means to have them move back in, in terms of what prey they're eating, how are they contributing to the forest ecosystem," he said.

With the natural reintroduction of a predator species, it's important, Joyce said, to see the whole picture of benefits the mammals can bring to the southeastern region of Minnesota.

"There are a lot of benefits of having predators back in ecosystems (where) they used to live. They do more than just kill prey. ... Fishers do things like disperse seeds, disperse fungal spores," Joyce said.

Despite some growing pains as the fishers continue to re-establish their foothold in southern Minnesota, Joyce views it as a positive natural occurrence.

"We'd love to have them continue to do well down there, but we also need to make sure we balance all the different things that need to happen in the forest," Joyce said.

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