

For Mount Rainier's resident wolverine, it's paradise on Paradise

By ALEX BRUELL
Reporter

Mothering can be a thankless job. Even then, most of us don't have to do it 7,000 feet atop a snow-covered mountain.

But for Mount Rainier resident Joni, digging up frozen goat carcasses and curling inside snow-covered dens with her two young kits is just what she's made to do.

And in doing so, she's making history: For two years running, Joni's been the only known wolverine in a century raising young at the Mount Rainier National Park.

Joni made headlines last year after raising two male kits, making them the first wolverine family at the park in more than 100 years. This summer, the National Park Service and Cascades Carnivore Project announced she'd started raising another pair.

Jocelyn Akins, founder of Cascades Carnivore, a conservation group dedicated to tracking and researching animals like wolverines, said Joni is named after singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell, because she was first documented near the Paradise area of Mount Rainier. (Think Mitchell's hit 'Big Yellow Taxi.')

Researchers first detected her in late 2019, and in early 2020 realized she was a female - and lactating.

They've caught her chewing on meat, navigating snowy hills and climbing trees with her kits around the mountain. Luring Joni into ranger stations with big juicy bones, they've documented Joni and her young as they trek the vast expanse of the mountain.

Many park visitors have caught glimpses of Jody, including Akins, who saw her in May last year.

"She was just cruising through one of the most remote parts of the park,

up this big glacial braided river valley and through this super steep slope," Akins said. "She never looked at us. She had the whole park to herself, and she was a momma on a mission, cruising around, totally content, and unwary."

But for now, the success of Joni's Mount Rainier family remains precarious.

All She Wants

Wolverines once roamed as far south as California and Colorado, but trapping and accidental deaths from programs to control other predators since the 19th century reduced their U.S. population. By the early to mid 20th century, their Washington population was extirpated, or locally extinct.

Their population now is "notoriously challenging" to pin down, but Akins said the best estimate is that there are currently around 40 to 50 wolverines in Washington. Across the contiguous U.S., researchers estimate there are somewhere between 290 to 1,000, Akins said.

Wolverines in Washington have for decades been mostly confined to the North Cascades, north of highway 90. But the animals are now trickling further south. Wolverine sightings have been documented returning to the South Cascades since 2006, Akins said, when the Yakima Nation detected one at Mount Adams.

That inspired Akins in 2008 to start the Cascades Carnivore Project with the goal of better researching and encouraging the survival of wolverines and other rare carnivores in Washington.

In 2016, a wolverine named Pepper was discovered in the Naches Ranger District, and by spring 2018, Cascades Carnivore researchers confirmed she was lactating and thus had kits - making her the first wolverine in the South

Cascades to do so in many decades.

Wolverines are scavengers and hunters of mammals like squirrels, rabbits, and even deer. They live in high altitude, cold climates by choice: Their thick, oily fur keeps them insulated from water and frost, a blessing that also made them attractive to the fur trade.

"I just find it incredible that they're able to survive in this desolate landscape," Akins said. "Most other species move downslope in the winter. But wolverines and these mountain foxes that we study, they stay up. ... In the summer, they're seeking out snow fields to stay cool."

Wolverines carve out a rare niche, Akins said. They live high in the mountains year-round and in low numbers with vast territories. Despite their secluded lifestyles, they are obligate carnivores that need plenty of prey to scavenge and hunt.

Those attributes make them valuable barometers of an environment; it's a good sign if an alpine ecosystem can support animals as unique as wolverines. But those same traits also make their recovery difficult to track.

The Last Time She Saw Van

Crucial to Joni's mountain family is her mate, a big wolverine named Van who is the only confirmed male in the park, Akins said.

Male wolverines tend to either not mate at all or form lifelong relationships with two or three females, prowling the same territory as their partners. Van's in the latter camp. In 2018, he mated with Pepper, and more recently, Van has fathered both of Joni's kits the last two years.

Around eight to twelve months after their birth, mom wolverines tend to

push their kits out on their own. That's when dads like Van sometimes come in to show them the rest of the ropes, Akins said.

"The dad is presumably showing the wolverines his haunts, where he goes to make a living," Akins said.

Van visited Joni's first kits last fall, she said, and he may start doing so again with her new kits soon.

Joni's first kits, both males, were voracious eaters that had already outgrown her by August last year.

"We saw her at our stations all last year, and sometimes she'd just be laying there like, 'I'm just a bedraggled mom,'" Akins said.

But there's a problem: The scientists aren't aware of any eligible wolverine bachelorettes in the park.

"So one of the kits 'left the park ... came up to the Yakima Canyon highway, and it was hit by a car and killed," Akins said.

The fate of the other one is unknown.

This year, Joni's second litter is "very, very playful" and growing up fast. At this point, they're likely old enough to spend time on their own but still hang out with mom, Akins said. In other words, they're sort of like late teenagers still living at home.

For the sake of continuing the family, Akins and other researchers hope the slightly smaller kit is female.

Wolverine mothers patrol and defend huge territories, and Joni's no exception - her roughly 200 square mile queendom rules over Mount Rainier.

Female wolverines are willing to shrink their territory for daughters but not for sons, Akins said. And there are reports of an unnamed male in the Goat Rocks Wilderness, halfway between Mount Rainier and Adams. So Joni's kits may yet have a chance to start new families close to home, such



Joni and her kits, in an image shared by Jocelyn Akins at the Cascades Carnivore Project.

as with new wolverines visiting from the north Cascades.

If they can make it through their first year of adolescence, their chances of surviving are "vastly improved," Akins said.

Big White Mountain

Are we looking at the beginning of a wolverine renaissance in the Cascades? Maybe, says Akins. Their population is still so small that it's too early to tell.

"The pattern you see is this trickle of wolverines," Akins said. "It's definitely a very slow recovery."

Pepper, for instance, has disappeared, and researchers presume she's died by now. The fate of her kits is also unknown.

Given wolverines' low numbers and large territories, vehicle collisions are another big part of the conservation effort, Akins said. Wildlife overpasses across highways can help reduce those crashes, she said.

Long-term, the creature's main threat is climate change, Akins said. Losing snowpack means wolverines will have less real estate to raise and feed their young.

The "vast majority" of wolverine dens are built into the snow, Akins said, and boulders and downed trees provide the structure

for their safe, dry havens. They also store meat in the snow to save it for later, a tactic that's especially useful for denning mothers.

"The mom needs to be able to have food that's close by," Akins said. "You can imagine how challenging that is in the winter, when they're just roaming vast areas trying to find food. ... They need to have their little refrigerator close by."

For now at least, there's still plenty of snow for the wolverines to romp around atop the mountain, Akins said. And it's illegal to hunt them, according to Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife spokesperson Rebecca Bennett.

So at least for now, no one's paved over Joni's paradise.

"I'm shocked by how much visitors have had the opportunity to see her, and I think it's a real reflection of how comfortable she is in the park," Akins said. "She knows it's a really safe place for wolverines to be."

Those who see wolverines in the wild should enjoy the moment, Akins said, and consider reporting those sightings to the Cascades Carnivore Project. Wolverine sightings don't attack people, she said; they run from them.

"No one's going to believe that you saw it," Akins said with a laugh, "so just count yourself lucky."

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