



## PINE MARTEN BIOLOGY

The Pine Marten (*Martes Americana*) is a solitary, mink-sized **arboreal** weasel that can weigh up to 1.6 kg (about 3.5 lbs). The colour of its fur varies from yellowish to dark brown, typically becoming lighter around the ears and throat. They have dark bushy tails and large paws, allowing them to navigate through deep snow. Their retractable claws make them great tree climbers.

Marten are opportunistic feeders. Their diet consists of mice, voles, squirrels, rabbits, birds, fish, insects, eggs but they will also eat fruit and nuts if available. Their eating habits will of course depend on the season and what is readily available.

Marten can be found in northern mixed wood forests, but their preferred habitat is undoubtedly thick, mature to over-mature coniferous forests. These offer a lot of overhead cover, providing both protection and numerous feeding opportunities. This forest type is found across the northern hemisphere.

In order for habitat to be suitable, it must have a good availability of den sites. Marten can have multiple dens: they have been found in hollow logs and stumps, cavities in windfalls and standing trees, rocky crevasses as well as snow dens. Vegetative nests in trees are also used when snow cover is lacking. Although the marten's **home range** can vary between 70 and 2000 hectares (175 to 5000 acres), it has been observed in Riding Mountain National Park (RMNP) that marten will seldom wander out of their ideal habitat, if they can find it.

As is the case with most species of wild animals, the marten male is very territorial and does not like to share his territory with members of the same sex. He will usually tolerate the presence of juvenile males until they reach sexual maturity, at 2 years of age, at which time they will be forced away to find their own home. Male and female home ranges frequently overlap.

Mature, healthy martens will mate in July and August and what follows is quite interesting. Fertilization in the female is followed by a period of **embryonic diapause**, whereby the fertilized egg remains in stasis for approximately six months. Following this period, a healthy female's eggs become active and embryos develop quickly over 2 to 3 months. Litters average three young, but a malnourished or sick female runs the chance of having no offspring. Embryonic diapause is an amazing survival feature not uncommon in wildlife.

Born blind, deaf and covered with fine yellowish fur, young martens weigh about 28g at birth. Young martens will open their eyes at 5 to 7 weeks and will leave their mother at 3 to 4 months to fend for themselves. And life won't be easy for them at first. In RMNP, they face many competitors for food, including the short-tailed weasel, fisher, mink, ermine, skunk, red fox, coyote and lynx. Owls and hawks also compete for their share of prey.

The marten's avoidance of large open areas and its superb, squirrel-like climbing skills keep it relatively safe from terrestrial predators. The main threats to their existence are snaring, trapping, loss of habitat and, occasionally, disease and parasites. In the best of circumstances, marten can be expected to survive 12 years in the wild.

