



RE-INTRODUCTION OF THE MARTEN TO RIDING MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK

The Pine Marten (*Martes American*) was **extirpated** from the Riding Mountain National Park (RMNP) region in the early 20th century. Its soft, thick mink-like fur made it a highly valued commodity and, in the absence of proper regulations, it was eradicated by trappers. Decades of logging compounded the problem by slashing much of the marten's habitat right off the map. This however did not mean the marten would never return to RMNP.

Well before the Species at Risk Act of 2002 (see "Species at Risk Act" fact sheet), Parks Canada and RMNP were mandated to re-introduce species that were historically part of the park ecosystem in such numbers to ensure a naturally regenerating population. It was judged that the marten's re-introduction would not damage the park's **ecological integrity**, but rather fill an ecological niche left vacant by its extirpation.

Furthermore, since being successfully re-introduced in Alaska in 1933-34, there had been numerous re-introductions throughout the central US and Canada, including several national parks; Prince Albert (1954), Terra Nova (1982), Fundy (1984), Kejimikujik (1987). By the late 1980s, the success of these programs had given rise to the idea of attempting a re-introduction in RMNP.

Before this could be done, important factors had to be considered. Park wardens first had to make a habitat and food source analysis to determine exactly where the marten could be re-introduced. Measuring 2973 km², RMNP is quite a big park and it comprises distinct ecosystems. Using **GIS technology**, the wardens created vegetation maps of the park to pinpoint ideal marten habitat: mature to over mature coniferous forests. To further assess habitat suitability, park wardens also did prey base studies, which consist mainly in winter **track transects** (i.e. track count), to ensure the martens would have sufficient rodents, birds, insects, etc., to feed on. In the end, deliberations focused on three potential release sites and, eventually, a consensus formed. The martens would be released at Whirlpool Lake (GPS coordinates: UTM 442822 / 5617369):



Photo: Bob Johnson (used with permission by Parks Canada)

Dawn at Whirlpool Lake, Riding Mountain National Park.



In the next step of the re-introduction process, wardens had to find and capture a healthy stock of martens. Luckily, they didn't have to look very far. There was an abundant marten population just 50 km north of RMNP, in Duck Mountain Provincial Park. After making arrangements with provincial authorities, 65 young healthy martens of both sexes were captured, tattooed and released near Whirlpool Lake.

Monitoring is the final step in the re-introduction process and it is essential to evaluating success. Eight marten were outfitted with radio collars and watched on a regular basis to record movement and observe how quickly they would spread out from the release site. **Track transects** and **bait stations** equipped with cameras were also set up to measure marten population growth, dispersal and general health. The conclusions reached from the monitoring efforts were extremely positive. Marten thrived in their new home and their population grew.

The re-introduction began in the fall of 1991 and ended three years later. Nearly 20 years later, park wardens estimate their population to number in the thousands. Be sure to keep your eyes peeled next time you visit RMNP, you could get lucky and meet a marten, this most recent (re)addition to the region's ecosystem.