

Elko County's Wolverines

By Larry Hyslop



A wolverine, *Gulo gulo*, the Latin term for glutton, photo from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

The wolverine has been lost from much of its ancient range, and this includes northern Elko County. Fewer than 300 live within the United States, outside of Alaska. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) is considering listing it as an endangered species.

Elko County was home to a small population of wolverines in the 1800s. Several newspaper articles mention them, such as the Elko Independent, on October 28, 1871: *"While visiting Mountain City last week, Allen Fisher presented us with a skin of this singular animal – called man-eater from his singular proclivity for human flesh. They are quite small, compactly made, with a bull-dog shaped head, coarse hair, resembling somewhat in color the brown bear . . ."*

These descriptions of what were called "man-eaters" were not badgers, since the accounts describe much larger animals. Wolverines weigh up to 40 pounds while badgers are about half that size, plus have distinct facial stripes. Besides, badgers were too common for people to confuse with this different animal.

Across the West, intentional trapping of wolverines stopped in the early 1900s, plus poisoning of wolves and bears stopped, which also killed wolverines. Since then, they have been slowly spreading out and increasing their populations. In 2009, one tagged individual moved from Wyoming into Colorado's Rocky Mountain National Park, the first known wolverine in Colorado since 1919.

No recent local sightings have been scientifically verified, but wolverines may visit from time to time. The Nevada Department of Wildlife heard of a possible sighting in the Jarbidge Mountains several years back, by a visitor who once lived in Alaska and had had seen wolverines there. Agee Smith of the Cottonwood Ranch knows of two sightings, both of which he feels are solid. Both were in the Jarbidge Mountains, and one was only a few years ago.

Although the USFWS is considering the reintroduction of wolverines into Colorado, no mention has been made of returning them to Elko County. The local population was small and suitable habitat has likely been lost. High mountain zones that could support wolverines include locations such as the Sierra Nevada and mountains in Colorado and New Mexico. The USFWS web site shows a map of habitat that could be suitable for wolverines, and it includes several mountain ranges in Nevada, including the Jarbidge and Ruby Mountains.

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