



Point to Ponder

The “*Martes* Complex” — An Opportunity to Bring Together Marten, Fisher, Sable, Wolverine, and Tayra Biologists

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Abstract

Recent phylogenetic studies have shown that the genus *Martes* is polyphyletic with respect to the Fisher (*Pekania pennanti*), which is more closely related to the Wolverine (*Gulo gulo*) and Tayra (*Eira barbara*) than it is to the martens. We refer to the 11 species in the genera *Martes*, *Pekania*, *Gulo*, and *Eira* as the “*Martes* Complex”. Because the species comprising the *Martes* Complex share many physical, behavioural, and ecological traits, we believe that biologists and managers interested in any of these species would benefit from meeting with colleagues and exchanging information and ideas to address challenging conservation issues.

Key Words: Fisher, *Pekania pennanti*, martens, *Martes*, *Martes* Complex, Sable, Tayra, *Eira barbara*, Wolverine, *Gulo gulo*.

During the last 20 years, fossil records and molecular genetic studies have provided the scientific community with new insights about the *Martes* lineage. Hughes (2012:15) described its evolutionary history as “a series of dispersals and speciations against a backdrop of cooling climates, sea-level changes, mountain uplifts, aridification, and cyclical glacial events, all creating barriers to gene flow.” Until recently, the genus *Martes* included the American Marten (*Martes americana*) and Fisher (*M. pennanti*) in northern North America; the European Pine Marten (*M. Martes*) and Stone (Beech, House) Marten (*M. foina*) in Europe and south-central Asia; the Sable (*M. zibellina*) in northern and eastern Asia; the

Japanese Marten (*M. melampus*) in Japan and the Korean Peninsula; the Yellow-throated Marten (*M. flavigula*) in southeast Asia; and the Nilgiri Marten (*M. gwatkinsii*) in southern India (Proulx *et al.* 2004; Aubry *et al.* 2012). However, a series of phylogeographic and morphometric studies have provided compelling evidence for the existence of another species in the genus *Martes* – the Pacific Marten (*M. caurina*) of the western United States and southwestern Canada (Carr and Hicks 1997; Stone and Cook 2002; Stone *et al.* 2002; Small *et al.* 2003; Dawson and Cook 2012).

Recent phylogenetic studies of the Mustelidae (Koepli *et al.* 2008) and Musteloidea (Sato *et al.* 2012) have shown, however, that the genus *Martes* is polyphyletic with respect to the Fisher. This species is indeed more closely related to the Wolverine (*Gulo gulo*) and Tayra (*Eira barbara*) than it is to the martens. It was the only extant species in the sub-genus *Pekania* within the genus

Martes; consequently, both sources recommended that *Pekania* be elevated to the genus level, and that the Fisher be reclassified as *Pekania pennanti*. Thus, it is now clear that the genera *Martes*, *Pekania*, *Gulo*, and *Eira* include all extant species within a larger genetic lineage (Hosoda *et al.* 2000; Koepfli *et al.* 2008; Sato *et al.* 2012). However, no currently recognized subfamily encompasses this lineage. Previously, the subfamily Martinae included the genera *Martes*, *Gulo*, and *Eira* (e.g., Koepfli *et al.* 2008); on the other hand, Sato *et al.* (2012) referred to the subfamily Guloninae when describing phylogenetic relationships among *Martes*, *Gulo*, and *Pekania* (their work did not include *Eira*). Although much has been learned during the last 20 years about the phylogeny and evolutionary history of these mustelids, further investigations will be needed to resolve these uncertainties. Accordingly, we propose that the term “*Martes* Complex” be used to describe the 11 species that comprise the genera *Martes*, *Pekania*, *Gulo*, and *Eira*.

Although one can find common traits between any two species, whether related or not, we believe that the species in the *Martes* Complex share many physical, behavioural, and ecological traits (e.g., Kucera and Zielinski 1995; Presley 2000; Proulx *et al.* 2004) that justify considering them as a distinct group from a research and conservation perspective. Wildlife biologists can benefit from analysing commonalities among these species to develop more effective multi-species conservation action plans where they live in sympatry (Carroll *et al.* 2001; Proulx 2005) or far apart but in similar ecosystems (e.g., Yellow-throated Marten and Tayra). Nearly 80 years ago, the Tayra was described as a large mustelid similar in appearance to Nearctic members of the genus *Martes* that was believed to play similar ecological roles in Neotropical regions (Scott 1937). Like most *Martes* species, Tayras are solitary, forest-dwelling mesocarnivores with large spatial requirements. Like Yellow-throated Martens, they are frugivorous, but they supplement their diet with small vertebrates and insects (Presley 2000; Zhou *et al.* 2011). Like Stone Martens, Tayras have adjusted to living near human habitations, and take advantage of food provided by humans (Hall and Dalquest 1963; Hershkovitz 1972; Genovesi *et al.* 2009).

The American Marten, Pacific Marten, Pine Marten, Sable, Fisher, and Wolverine, are valuable furbearers that are susceptible to over-harvest because of their relatively low reproductive rates and large home ranges (Bakeyev and Simitsyn 1994; Banci and Proulx 1999; Helldin 2000). The Wolverine occupies a broader range of habitat conditions than other members of the *Martes* Complex, due to its primary need for cold climatic conditions (Copeland *et al.* 2010). In the boreal regions of Canada and the United States, however, they occupy large areas of mature timber (Hornocker and Hash 1981), much like American, Pacific, and Japanese Martens, and the Sable (Buskirk *et al.* 1996). In addition, the composition of winter diets of Fishers and Wolverines in the southern boreal forests of British Columbia reveals similarities in forest habitat use

(Weir *et al.* 2005; Lofroth *et al.* 2007). Thus, managing winter habitats of American and Pacific Martens and the Fisher would also benefit Wolverines (Proulx 2005).

On the basis of these and other commonalities, we believe that biologists working on any of these species would share many topics of mutual interest. Consequently, the *Martes* Complex provides an opportunity for wildlife biologists from different academic institutions, public agencies, and NGOs to network and exchange ideas for developing management or conservation programs that include similar species. Given their smaller size and ability to thrive in diverse habitats, mesocarnivores are usually more abundant than large carnivores, yet their impact within communities is generally assumed to be relatively minor (Roemer *et al.* 2009). In the absence of large carnivores, however, mesocarnivore populations may expand in density or distribution and serve as apex predators in ecosystems (Prugh *et al.* 2009). Anyone who has studied species in the *Martes* Complex know that they play important roles in the ecosystems they occupy, yet the public often has limited knowledge or experience about these cryptic species. Consequently, we believe that the biologists and managers who work on these species should make a concerted effort to increase public awareness and ensure that they are not overlooked in wildlife management or conservation plans. It is also important to meet with colleagues on a regular basis to exchange information and ideas. There is no doubt that some marten and Fisher specialists will find it difficult to create new relationships with colleagues who specialize on the Wolverine or Tayra, and *vice versa*. Moreover, some professionals may argue that the Wolverine is so different from the Stone Marten that there is no point in considering them together. However, we believe that we can overcome such difficulties and develop a network of *Martes*-related specialists that will provide substantial benefits to its members. Such a network can only be beneficial to the long-term persistence of species in the *Martes* Complex. We believe it would lead to better understandings of conservation issues, and a desire to work collaboratively on common problems.

A good example of such networking opportunities is provided by the *Martes* Working Group (MWG), which was founded in 1993 soon after the first symposium on the biology and conservation of martens, sables, and fishers was convened in 1991 (Proulx and Santos-Reis 2012; see Buskirk *et al.* 1994). By the early 1990s, most species in the genus *Martes* had experienced range reductions or population declines, but very little was known about their biology, ecological relations, or conservation status. The MWG organized four international symposia which led to the publication of four textbooks on martens, sables, and fishers (Proulx *et al.* 1997; Harrison *et al.* 2004; Santos-Reis *et al.* 2006; Aubry *et al.* 2012) that updated the scientific community about the evolution, taxonomy, morphophysiology, genetics, population dynamics, habitat and predator-prey relations, food preferences, parasites, and diseases of these species (Proulx and Santos-Reis 2012). The MWG publishes

a Newsletter each year in which the members share their findings or preliminary results, and discuss the biology and conservation of their species of interest. In addition, members of the *Martes* Working Group meet every 4-5 years to discuss their concerns and share information about their research programs. In accordance with the information presented here, the MWG recently expanded its taxonomic scope to include the Wolverine and Tayra, and to recognize the new generic designation for the Fisher (Proulx 2013). Thus, we hope that the MWG will help bring together biologists and managers working on Martens, Sables, Fishers, Wolverines, and Tayras, so they can share their knowledge and experiences, and find new ways to address challenging conservation issues.

INTRODUCTION

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