

Ontario Wolverines: A Model for Wolverine Conservation and Recovery in Eastern Canada

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Executive Summary

The lack of knowledge regarding the ecology of wolverines in low-elevation boreal forest systems jeopardizes our ability to conserve populations of this species in Ontario or to attain recovery in eastern Canada. Over a two year period, we are utilizing two critical survey and inventory techniques -- annual aerial track surveys conducted by wolverine specialists, and systematic collection of indigenous knowledge from six northern First Nation communities conducted -- to further our knowledge of broad-scale distribution and conservation status of wolverine in remote areas of the province. We conducted the first of two aerial track surveys in northwestern Ontario, covering 6000 km and 27 different habitat strata over a 10-day period in February, 2003 using two PA-18 Supercubs with pilots experienced in tracking wolverines from the air. Wolverine tracks were detected in 39% of the 183 surveyed hexagons (1000 km² in size), indicating a more even distribution over northern Ontario than locations derived from harvest records and incidental sightings. Although 28 First Nations communities are situated in the heart of wolverine range in Ontario, no formal attempts have been made to collect indigenous knowledge, and wolverine harvest information comes only from fur auction reports. This year, we interviewed 60 elders and trappers in three communities to obtain information on harvest, historical distributions, relative abundance, and cultural attitudes. Preliminary results indicate the number of wolverine taken in each community showed good correspondence with that reported at fur auctions. In spite of overall negative attitudes, there was no evidence of systematic persecution of wolverines. Harvest was instead opportunistic or in response to real or potential threats to fur trapping success. Both surveys resulted in a total of 202 spatially-explicit locations that will be used as input in habitat modeling to inform

conservation planning north of the 51st parallel. This project is being integrated with a larger multi-partner project coordinated by The Wolverine Foundation, the broader goals of which are to collect baseline ecological information on wolverines and to contribute information to conservation land use planning in northern Ontario and recovery of lowland boreal wolverine populations in eastern Canada.

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