

Wildlife Express!

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American Marten

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American Marten



Let's Talk About . . . The American Marten

There is a word that describes the American marten well – cute! They look a bit like a small, slender house cat with a long, bushy tail.

American martens are 18 to 26 inches long and weigh only one to three pounds. Their face is pointed with big round ears. American martens have beautiful fur. It is brown to black in color and silky soft. On their throats, they have a splash of color. This fur is a creamy white to orange color.

You may hear people call American martens, pine martens; they live in dense forests. American martens are excellent tree climbers. They have semi-retractable claws similar to a cat. With their claws and long tail for balance, American martens can zip up a tree and leap between trees quickly and easily. In Idaho, they are found mostly in conifer forests. They really like the forest floor to be covered with fallen logs, stumps and shrubs. The trees on the ground are the perfect place to find shelter and food.

What do American martens eat? They mostly eat voles. Voles are small rodents that look like mice. Martens run around on the forest floor poking their heads onto holes, fallen logs and rocks looking for voles. They may ambush their prey or leap from a “hunting perch” from a tree. American martens also eat red squirrels, chipmunks, rabbits, insects, birds, eggs, fruits and berries.

American martens are animals that like to live alone. The only time American martens are seen together is during the breeding season or if mothers have young. Marten babies, called kits, are born in March or April. The mother may have between one to five kits. The kits are born in a hole in a tree or other cozy spot. The young are helpless, blind and tiny when born. They weigh only as much as three crayons! Kits may be small

when born, but they grow quickly drinking their mother's milk. For the first six weeks of their lives, the kits are nursed by their mother. When the kits are six to seven weeks old, the mother will start to wean them and bring them meat to eat. By the time the kits are three months old, they are nearly full grown and able to live on their own.

Next time you are in an Idaho forest, don't forget to look up. You may be lucky enough to see a curious American marten looking back at you. You may even see it leaping and jumping from tree to tree!



Photo courtesy Gerald and Buff Corsi
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BE OUTSIDE
IDAHO CHILDREN IN NATURE

Be Outside In Winter!

Winter is a wonderful time to explore the outdoors! A blanket of new snow makes familiar places look quite

different. Noisy streams become silent under ice and snow. Animals that you rarely see can now be “seen” when you find their tracks in the snow. Cold nips your cheeks, and makes you look forward to a cup of hot chocolate after being outside.

Winter activities are many. Skiing and skating are great ways to enjoy winter. So are sledding and snowshoeing. Even if you do not have any equipment you can still enjoy winter by just taking a walk in the snow. Build a snow fort with your friends or decorate your yard with snowmen. If it is snowing, catch some snowflakes on your mittens and use a magnifying glass to look at the beautiful crystals. Take a walk in new snow to see what animal tracks you can find. Look for bird nests in the trees. If you live near a river or lake, do some winter bird watching to look for bald eagles and ducks. Don't forget to check out the winter night sky. Cold, clear winter nights can give you some great opportunities to see the stars.

No matter what kind of winter activity you enjoy, dressing properly is very important. Wear layers that you can take off when you warm up and put back on if you feel cold. Snowpants can help you stay warm and dry. Warm boots are very important for winter fun and don't forget a hat

and mittens. Wearing a hat is one of the best ways to stay warm, no matter what you are doing. So,

get into your winter clothes and head outside for some winter fun. After all, winter is a big part of every year in Idaho!



The Weasel Family

Members of the weasel family are called mustelids (mus-TELL-ids). In Latin, “mustela” means weasel. This group of animals includes wolverine, badger, fisher, weasels, American marten, mink, and otters. In Idaho, we have eight species of mustelids.

Mustelids are found on every continent except Antarctica and Australia. They range in size from the sea otter that can weigh as much as a third grader to the least weasel which weighs about as much as two pinkie erasers. Wolverines are the largest mustelid in Idaho; they usually weigh between 20 to 40 pounds. Short-tailed weasels are the smallest. They are eight to 14 inches long and weigh two to seven ounces.

Most mustelids have long, slender bodies and short legs. They can fit easily into tight spaces or move through the water. Even the bulky-looking badger and wolverine are amazingly flexible and quick. Several species, including the marten and fisher, are excellent climbers. The otters and mink are wonderful swimmers and spend a lot of time in the water.

The long, thin shape of mustelids makes it difficult to stay warm and store fat, so they eat a lot. As a family, mustelids are mainly carnivores. They eat other animals, but they may also eat fruits, berries or plants. When a mustelid kills more than it can eat at one sitting, it saves the rest for another meal. The leftovers are hidden in a place called a “cache” (cash). When the animal is hungry, it will return to the cache and finish eating its prey.

All members of the weasel family have something in common. They stink! Mustelids have glands located at the base of the tail that make musk. Musk is a strongly scented liquid. Musk may be used to attract a mate. It is also used to mark their homes or territories. The smell tells other members of the same species to stay out! Some mustelids mark their caches with musk. By doing this, they are warning others to stay away from their food. The smell also helps them locate the cache later.

Keep an eye out for mustelids while enjoying time in Idaho's wild lands. These active, curious and strong creatures can be very entertaining to watch!

Furbearers in Idaho History

Furbearers are animals that are trapped or hunted for their fur. Furbearers are the reason European people first came to this area.

In the early 1800s, fur was used to make coats, hats, gloves and other pieces of clothing. The American marten was called the American sable in Europe. The sable is closely related to our marten. Sable fur was worn only by royalty and nobles. As sables became harder to find, people trapped American martens and shipped them to Europe to use in place of sables.

Beaver trapping had a huge impact on Idaho history. Beaver hats were once very popular. Every man wanted one. Soon beavers were harder to find in the Eastern United States and Canada. This brought trappers to what we now call Idaho.

In 1809, David Thompson built Kullyspell House by Lake Pend Oreille. This was the first European building constructed in Idaho. The house was built for the Northwest Fur Company. Soon other trappers heard about all the beavers in the area. By 1811, four fur companies were trapping beavers and other animals in Idaho. Mountain men who were not members of fur companies were also trapping animals.

At the time, Idaho was unclaimed territory. The United States and Great Britain signed a treaty in 1818 that let people from both countries live on the land, but both countries wanted to own the land. Great Britain operated The Hudson's Bay Fur Company. They wanted to create a "fur desert" to keep the Americans out of the area and claim the land for Great Britain. They thought that if they trapped all the beavers, no Americans would want to live

here. Between 1818 and 1827, they trapped 85,000 beavers out of the Snake River alone! Now that is a lot of beavers. Trapping all of those beavers didn't keep Americans out of the area. Russia gave the Northwest Territory, which included Idaho, to the United States in 1824.

Pioneers and homesteaders also trapped animals. Trapping was one way to feed a family and earn money. Some animals, especially beavers, were becoming hard to find. Too many beavers were being trapped. Some people thought beavers needed protection. In 1899, a law was passed that protected beavers from being trapped or hunted. The law helped and beavers become more common. In 1957, people were once again allowed to trap beavers. With proper laws and management, Idaho will always have furbearers in our state.

What's Your Niche?

Think of the town where you live. People in your community have jobs that make it a nice place to live. There are doctors that keep you healthy. Teachers that help you learn, and people that make food for you to eat.

Animals, plants and other organisms also have jobs and roles to play where they live. This role is called a niche (NICH). An animal's niche includes such things as where and how the animal gathers food and its link in a food chain. American martens eat many rodents and help keep rodent population from growing too large.

Within ecosystems, every living thing has important jobs and roles. If one of these organisms is missing, the ecosystem will be unhealthy. At times, it may be hard to see an animal's niche. What about skunks? They just seem like stinky animals that may cause farmers problems. Even the smelly skunk has a role in nature. Skunks eat more insects than anything else. They really love to eat grasshoppers, beetles and moth larvae. Many of the insects skunks eat like to munch on farmer's crops. Skunks help farmers by eating crop pests. The small bit of grass or soil they dig up looking for food is a small price to pay for all the insects they eat.

What's your niche? Do you have an important job or role to play in your family or school?



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Wonderful Whiskers



Photo courtesy Gerald and Buff Corsi
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American martens have whiskers on their faces that help them while hunting. Other animals depend on whiskers, as well.

Imagine you are an animal hunting during a dark, moonless night. Your eyes, although designed to work in low light, are having a difficult time seeing. You

are hungry, and you know a mouse must be nearby. How are you going to find the mouse if you can't see it? Use your whiskers to feel the vibrations caused by the mouse moving.

Whiskers are great tools for animals that hunt at night or in dark places. Whiskers are special hairs that are very sensitive to touch and movement. All mammals, except humans, have whiskers. Although men's beards are called whiskers, they are just body hairs. Animal whiskers are different than the whiskers on a man's beard.

Whiskers are called vibrissae (vy-BRISS-ee). They are thicker and rooted deeper in the skin than regular hairs. Each whisker sits in a sack of fluid filled with nerves. Whiskers can turn in the fluid like a straw in a bottle. When something touches a whisker, the information goes down the hair to the nerves. The nerves tell the brain what the whiskers have felt.

Whiskers not only grow on animals' faces. Cats, foxes and squirrels have whiskers on their ankles. Some bats have them on their rumps, and underground burrowers, like moles, have whiskers behind their ears and on their tails and front feet. Flying squirrels use whiskers on their heads, feet and legs to help them find their way through trees at night.

Sometimes animals use whiskers to greet. When two rats meet, they rub their whiskers over each other. This helps them to identify the other rat.

Mammals would have a difficult time getting around and catching food without their whiskers. Whiskers help animals stay in touch with their environment.

Fantastic Fur

Many animals are covered by what is called fur. You know what fur looks like. Martens, bears and coyotes are all covered by fur. It looks like long, soft hair. However, there is more to fur than meets the eye.

Fur is made up of two different layers of hairs. Guard hairs make up the top layer. Guard hairs do just what their name says. They guard and protect the animal's second layer of fur and skin from weather and water. Often guard hairs are shiny, because animals put oil on them. Animals that spend a lot of time in water, like beavers and otters, don't want their fur and skin to get wet. They might get too cold if they got wet. Water hits the oily guard hairs and runs off the animals' backs keeping their fur dry.

Some animals, like beavers, have special glands that make oil just for spreading on their fur. Beavers' oil glands are at the base of their tails. Other animals have very small oil glands all over their skin to help keep the guard hairs oily.

The second layer of fur is called underfur. Underfur is shorter than the guard hairs. It is usually very soft and fluffy. Underfur keeps animals warm. Animals fluff up their underfur and trap air in it. The animals' bodies warm the trapped air. The warmed air acts like insulation, and the animals stay nice and cozy. This is what happens when you put on a coat. Your body heats the air trapped by the coat, and you stay warmer.

Some animals with fur also have other special hairs on their bodies. Can you think of any? Porcupines may come to mind. Porcupines have fur with quills. The quills are special hard hairs that protect porcupines from their enemies. When danger is near, porcupines will arch their backs and tuck their heads under their bodies. This makes the quills stick straight up in the air. If an animal tries to touch the porcupine, it will get a quill in its body. Porcupines cannot shoot quills. Remember a quill is just a hair. You can't shoot hairs out of your head and neither can porcupines.

Fur sure is a fantastic way for animals to stay warm during the cold winter.



What's That?

You're walking along a trail. All of the sudden, you see something grayish-white peeking out of the tall grass. Leaning forward you realize what it is – a skull. Now the mystery really begins. What animal did that skull belong to, and how did it live its life?

This may be a hard question to answer, but the skull will give you some clues. One of the best clues you have are the teeth. Teeth tell you what an animal eats. Animals that eat meat need teeth that will help them cut and tear. Meat eaters, called carnivores, have meat-cutting teeth along their cheeks. These teeth are sharp and pointed. When the top teeth and the bottom teeth come together, the teeth pass each other like scissors. Martens have no trouble slicing through a mouse with their teeth!

Sharp pointed teeth may work well for meat eaters, but they sure wouldn't help plant eaters. Plant eaters are called herbivores. Plants take a lot of chewing to break down. Just think how long you need to chew celery! Herbivores have tall teeth in the back of their mouths with flat tops. Flat teeth let the animals slide their top and bottom teeth against each other and grind plants.

We have teeth in the back of our mouths with low bumpy crowns, so do bears. Teeth with this shape belong to omnivores. Omnivores eat both meat and plants, so they need teeth that help cut and grind.

The location of the eye sockets on the skull can also tell you a lot. Predators, animals that eat other animals, need to be able to tell distances. This comes in

handy when reaching out to grab a mouse. Predators have eyes that face forward. Prey animals, animals that are eaten by other animals, have their eyes located more to the sides of their heads. This lets them look out for danger in almost every direction, without ever moving their heads.

Looking at these clues may not tell you what animal the skull came from, but it is a start. It may give you an idea of what the animal eats, and whether it is a predator or prey.



Hurray for Hair

Some animals have hair on their bodies instead of fur. Fur is made of two different layers of hairs. Hair is usually just one layer, and all the hairs look alike. Hairs are usually thick and stiff. Deer, elk, pronghorn and you, all have hair.

If you looked closely at a deer hair, you would see that it looks a bit like a straw. The hair is hollow. Animals with fur trap air to stay warm. Well, so do animals with hair. When they are cold, they stick their hairs up. They trap air inside and in between all of their hairs. The air trapped in the hair and in between the hair makes a nice coat of insulation against the cold.

Have you ever gotten goose bumps when you were cold? Look at a bump next time you have goose bumps. You will see a hair sticking up in the middle of the bump. Your body gets cold and tries to trap air by making your hair stand up. We are not very good at trapping air in our hair. Our hairs are too thin and short to trap air.

Many animals grow a thicker layer of hair for the winter. More hair means they can trap more air and stay warmer. Some animals with hair grow a thick woolly

layer of special hair close to their skin. Caribou do this. The woolly layer of hair is similar to the underfur of animals with fur. In the winter, caribou are out in temperatures that can get down to 60 degrees below zero! Now that's cold. Their woolly layer of hair insulates them from the cold and helps to block the icy wind.

In the spring, animals will shed their winter hair and grow thinner summer coats.

Animals often look shaggy and strange when they are shedding their long winter coats. People may even think an animal is sick. Once the silky summer hairs grow in, the animal will look good again.



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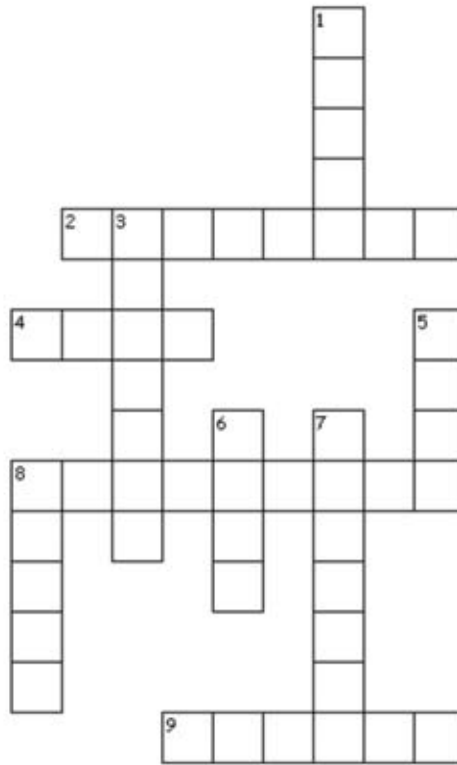
Marvelous Martens

Across

2. Vibrissae is the fancy word for _____.
4. Martens use this to scent mark their territories.
8. This is an animal that eats meat.
9. American martens are members of the _____ family.

Down

1. The word used to describe an animal's job in its environment.
3. Furbearers have played an important role in Idaho's _____.
5. This animal makes up most of the American marten's diet.
6. Baby martens are called _____.
7. American martens like to live in dense _____.
8. Martens have semi-retractable _____ that help them climb trees.



WORDS

Carnivore
Claws
Forests
History
Kits
Musk
Niche
Vole
Weasel
Whiskers

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