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American marten

Long distance travellers

On the trail of the American Marten in Terra Nova National Park

Many of the local students getting off the bus had never set foot in **Terra Nova National Park of Canada** before they arrived one sunny winter morning and strapped on their snow shoes. But they'll never forget seeing a live marten, thanks to park staff and volunteers involved in an extensive **American marten** recovery and monitoring program.

Parks Canada has been re-introducing martens into Terra Nova National Park (and tracking their whereabouts) for more than fifteen years, as part of its work to support the recovery of this threatened species. Current efforts focus on live trapping and radio-collaring adult martens to help park managers better understand whether the marten population is increasing, where they go, and what kind of habitat they use. Partnerships with schools and park visitors are an essential part of this work.



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Marten caught for research

A unique forest dweller in decline

The Newfoundland population of the American Marten is found only on the island of Newfoundland. One of fourteen sub-species of the American marten, it uses a wide range of habitats – including spruce and fir forests - for its survival.

Prized for its luxurious fur, the so-called 'marten cat' was common on the island a hundred years ago. However, wide-scale trapping and loss of habitat through logging and natural disturbances such as fire, reduced its population to dangerous levels in the early years.

By the late 1990s, the population had dipped to as low as 300 animals across the entire island. As a result of these trends, the Newfoundland population of marten was assessed by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) as endangered in 1986, and is now protected under the federal *Species at Risk Act*. Recent recovery work on the island, resulting in increasing numbers, has led to the status of marten moving from endangered to threatened in 2007.





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A refuge for recovery

When the marten was listed as an endangered species, it was found primarily in the western part of the province. But Terra Nova National Park – with its rich and abundant marten habitat, and the absence of trapping and logging pressures – offered an intriguing opportunity to try and rebuild a second population in a more protected setting.

Thanks in large part to former Parks Canada employee John Gosse and the Newfoundland Marten Recovery Team - which included researchers, land managers, and educators from all across the province - re-introduction of the marten into Terra Nova was identified as a key objective of their joint recovery efforts.

Building on the success of early re-location efforts, an additional 18 martens were released into the park between 1998 and 2008. At the same time, park staff radio-collared 17 resident animals, in order to monitor their movements and better understand their behaviour and their habitat needs.

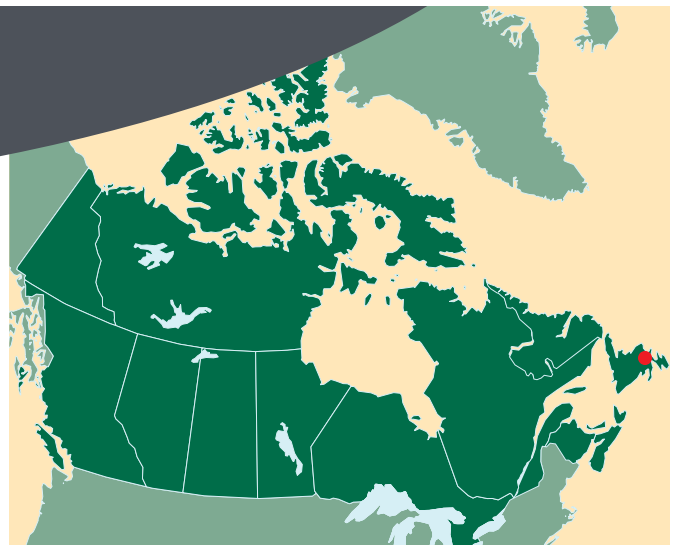
Information collected through these collars has helped park managers and researchers gain a more complete picture of the overall population and their movement through the park and adjacent areas. Martens are capable of covering great distances: one radio-collared marten travelled across the entire province - from Terra Nova in the east to the west coast and back - during the course of a single winter!

Based on the data collected so far, the project is succeeding. The number of martens in Terra Nova is steadily growing, and martens have been found throughout the park and in surrounding areas, in a variety of different habitat types.



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School teacher, Kelly Knot and her students



Terra Nova National Park of Canada



John Gosse determining the sex of a marten

Inspiring a sense of wonder and connection

Connecting to local schools and students has always been an important focus of the park's efforts. In partnership with teachers like Kelly Knot from William Mercer Academy just north of Terra Nova, park ecologists and interpreters have brought students out to participate in live trapping and monitoring activities.

This has been instrumental in raising public awareness about the marten, Newfoundland's most threatened mammal. It has also provided participating youth with a new and unusual connection to the park that they would otherwise never have had.

The group of students tumbling off the bus that February day did indeed get to see a marten. They watched in awe as the young female was released and darted like lightning out of sight. "When the students see one for the first time it's a kind of elation", says Mrs. Knot. "You can feel the electricity in the air. It's so amazing to see this little creature before us."

Looking to the future

Continued work is needed in order to ensure that the marten survives and thrives once again in its native province. Future work includes confirming population trends and conducting research to see if martens persist in areas after a prescribed burn. New techniques are also being used to try and determine the total area currently occupied by marten in the park.

But perhaps the most hopeful sign lies with the students that continue to come to the park in hopes of sighting the elusive marten. Their interest and enthusiasm bodes well for the future of the marten, in Newfoundland and beyond.

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