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Contact: _____

DEFENDERS HAILS RETURN OF FISHER TO TENNESSEE

CROSSVILLE, Tenn. -- Ten fishers, a species that became extinct in Tennessee more than 200 years ago as a result of intensive trapping and logging, were released yesterday in the 80,000-acre Catoosa Wildlife Management Area, according to Defenders of Wildlife. The 10 fishers join 10 additional animals that were released in the same area last Thursday. This reintroduction was made possible through financial contributions from Defenders of Wildlife and Duracell (now owned by the Gillette Co.) to the Tennessee-based Extirpated Species Foundation, which partnered with the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA) to carry out this historic effort.



Fisher - (Photo: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

The fishers -- including seven males and three females -- were captured last week in the Chequamegon National Forest of northern Wisconsin and surrounding state lands and then transported by airplane yesterday to Tennessee. The Catoosa Wildlife Management area was chosen as the reintroduction site because its large, undisturbed expanses of forest habitat provide the preferred habitat of this small member of the weasel family.

"With the return of fishers, the mountains of East Tennessee are a little bit wilder, a little bit more natural than they were last week," said Bob Ferris, vice president of species conservation for Defenders of Wildlife. "This project demonstrates that when state agencies, tribes and the private sector work together great things can be accomplished."

Each animal was fitted with a radio collar that will allow the TWRA to track the animals' movements. Next fall, an additional 20 fishers will be captured and relocated to the state in the same general area.

The fisher, also known as a pekan, is a member of the weasel family. Their long, slim bodies and short legs make them very swift and agile as well as excellent climbers.

Fishers are aggressive hunters, preying on a variety of animals including snowshoe hares, rabbits, squirrels, mice, shrews, and birds. They will also consume carrion, insects, nuts and berries. Despite their name, they do not hunt fish.

Like other carnivores, fishers play important roles in maintaining healthy ecosystems. For example, fishers are one of the few animals that are adapted to prey upon porcupines, which can inflict heavy damage to trees. Fishers also feed on snakes, rats and skunks – each of which prey heavily on ground nesting birds. By keeping these species in check, it is expected that over time the presence of fishers will lead to increased populations of turkey, grouse and quail and maintain healthier levels for porcupine populations.

"When we released the wolves in Yellowstone, we expected and are seeing big, positive changes to the ecosystem," commented Caroline Kennedy director of special projects for Defenders of Wildlife. "Restoring the fisher is more like fine tuning."

Biologists hope that each of the 10 females released in Tennessee had mated and will give birth to young next spring, which would help increase the population naturally. The young, typically in litters of one to four kits, remain with the mother until the fall. The population will be closely monitored for the next several years.

In addition to the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency and the Extirpated Species Foundation, Defenders is grateful to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and the Great Lakes Indian Wildlife and Fisheries Commission, which played a role in making this reintroduction a success. Special thanks go to the Ojibwe Indian tribe and Red Cliff Reservation.

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Defenders of Wildlife is a leading nonprofit conservation organization recognized as one of the nation's most progressive advocates for wolf recovery in the United States. With more than 470,000 members and supporters, Defenders of Wildlife is an effective leader on endangered species issues. For more information on this issue or other Defenders of Wildlife projects, please visit www.defenders.org, and for regular updates on important wildlife issues, subscribe to the DENLines bi-weekly electronic alert at www.defenders.org/den.