

Marten Sealing in Southeast

by Loyal Johnson

The shy and secretive marten, rare in most of the United States and Canada, is becoming better known to biologists in southeast Alaska through results of a mandatory sealing program.

"Sealing," according to the Alaska Trapping Regulations, means "placing a mark or tag on a portion of an animal by an authorized representative of the Department of Fish and Game; 'sealing' includes collecting and recording information concerning the conditions under which the animal was harvested and measurements of the specimen submitted for sealing or surrendering a specific portion of the animal for biological information." In short, "sealing" refers to official examination of a harvested animal. The data collected from sealing programs can provide essential information to wildlife biologists.

In the fall of 1984, the Alaska Board of Game put into effect a regulation requiring that all marten skins taken in southeast Alaska be examined by representatives of the Division of Game. The regulation resulted from fears expressed by both biologists and trappers that marten populations in Southeast were suffering from overexploitation and habitat losses through clear-cut logging and urban expansion, especially near larger communities.

History has shown that marten cannot tolerate widespread disruption of their coniferous forest habitat. Their numbers, in fact, can be sensitive indicators of habitat degradation. Areas producing consistent marten harvests are likely to be areas of high quality habitat, and that information can be useful to land management agencies.

Concern for marten, as well as other furbearing animals, is not new. The first comprehensive game regulations for the Territory of Alaska, formulated in 1926, were primarily fur-oriented. The Territory was divided into seven management units (compared to 26 today), which were called Fur Management Districts. (Today they are called Game Management Units.) Mandatory sealing, or examination, of marten skins was required intermittently from 1926 to 1947. The season was typically opened only on alternate years, and there were at least two closures for several years' duration.

Interest in furbearer management waned with declining fur prices in the 1950s. In recent years, as marten prices once more increased, so did interest in management of the species. The new mandatory sealing program was designed to give resource

managers information on sex, age, location and date of harvest, and the total harvest in a given area. Confidentiality was a matter of concern. Trappers were assured that specific site locations would not be revealed to the public.

Results of the first year's sealing showed the 1984-85 season to be a good one for marten trappers in Southeast. It is not known if the higher reported take for 1984-85 is the result of an increased take or is simply the results of better information. Discussions with trappers, local knowledge, and prices received for marten in 1984-85 all indicate that it is probably a combination of the two.

The new marten sealing program went smoothly the first year. Trappers, encouraged by the concern for the resource they use, spoke freely to biologists and provided the data needed.

Biologists started out measuring skins to see if they could determine sex or age from skin size but abandoned the process because it was quite time consuming and because there is too much variability in how skins are stretched (and can be measured).

During the first year, biologists learned much and are confident the program will allow the department to do a better job of managing this aspect of the state's fur resource. It will also provide more meaningful information for land-use decisions, primarily timber harvest.

ADF&G biologists also learned that, contrary to a long standing "truth," most marten skins from southeast Alaska are as good a quality as those from interior Alaska. The exception is a low percentage of skins described by fur graders as "wooly and with spiky guard hairs." Since such skins have traditionally caused all Southeast skins to be automatically downgraded, department representatives will no longer permanently mark individual skins.

Loyal Johnson, Area Biologist for ADF&G in Sitka, commented on his involvement in the sealing program: "Personally, I found it a pleasant experience to go to places I don't often have an opportunity to visit, to go into a trapper's house (or boat), meet him and perhaps his family, drink his coffee (and once have his wife's fresh-made donuts), hear his thoughts, concerns, and experiences, see how he processes his furs, talk guns, hunting, and trapping, and the like. I hope the trappers found it equally rewarding."

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