

Raising Whidehch (*Wha-detch*)

THE BABY FISHER THAT WAS BORN TO BE WILD BY SEAN MATTHEWS

A fevered chase, a well-timed pounce, and a crushing bite to head and neck end a contest for survival that lasts less than 15 seconds. Then come the crunching sounds of Whidehch's razor-sharp teeth breaking bones.

A house cat-size member of the weasel family is probably not the first predator you think of when visualizing this scene. But considering that the fisher sits one short evolutionary branch away from its cousin, the wolverine, and is one of the only predators able to penetrate the fortifications of a porcupine, the scene is not difficult to imagine.

It was this fisher family trait—the efficient killing of prey—that our research crew on the Hoopa Valley Fisher Project in northwestern California hoped to see consistently demonstrated by an orphaned fisher kit named Whidehch, which means “little, or younger sister” in the language of the Hupa people who live in the Hoopa Valley. Wildlife technician Aaron Pole chose the name in recognition of the fisher's cultural importance to his tribe. During the Brush Dance, an annual ceremony to heal the sick and purify the community, the Hupa place their arrows in quivers made from fisher pelts, which are passed down from generation to generation.

We rescued Whidehch on May 8, 2007 from a tree cavity den after her mother, Fisher 47, was apparently killed by a bobcat (see “Letter from the Field,” October 2007). Fisher 47 was one of 43 females we have radio collared on the reservation to help the tribe conserve habitat for this gravely threatened carnivore while harvesting timber on their land. The Hupa tribe is a regional leader in developing a sustainable timber extraction-based economy with strong protections for wildlife.

Losing a study animal is always upsetting. While conducting valuable research, we learn each animal's habits, the places it likes to hunt, even the trees it likes to take naps in. The loss of Fisher 47 had added meaning because her seven-week-old kit still depended on her for warmth, food, and instruction. With mom gone, our crew and the many friends who stepped forward assumed those maternal responsibilities.

Soon after WCS began working with the Hupa in 2004

we realized that a significant decline in the number of fishers on the reservation had occurred since the last intensive study, conducted from 1996 to '99. We suspected the decline was related to changes in available prey and habitat, increased predation by bobcats, disease, or some combination of these factors. Therefore, the loss of even one female from this population was cause for concern. That's why we decided to intervene to try to save this kit.



We delivered the helpless baby into the experienced hands of Amanda Austin, a volunteer for the Humboldt Wildlife Care Center in Arcata, California. Amanda had raised many raccoons, skunks, and even porcupines, but this was her first fisher. Six times a day for several days, she dripped kitten milk replacer into the baby's tiny mouth from a syringe. But as soon as both the kit's eyes fully opened, the fisher began eagerly devouring dead baby

mice, better known as pinkies. Within a week, she graduated to dead fuzzies, slightly older mice. “From the moment she could see, Whidehch played with her mink [the scraps of an old coat],” said Amanda. “She would hold it between her teeth and shake it, and lie on her back and kick at it like a cat.” Within a month, Whidehch had more than doubled in size and needed more space to grow.

We looked forward to the day we could release Whidehch back to the Hoopa forests. But before that could happen, she needed to know how to hunt and kill rats, squirrels, and birds, how to find snug places to rest, and how to avoid predators, so as not to meet her mother's fate. The alternative would be to remain in captivity and serve as an educational ambassador for fisher conservation.

Room to roam is exactly what Gretchen Ziegler, director of the Sequoia Park Zoo in Eureka, California, offered Whidehch. On June 6, the youngster tentatively sniffed her way out of a 6-square-foot travel kennel into a 300-square-foot enclosure. Within hours she was scrambling up and down

With a little help from California's Humboldt Wildlife Care Center, orphaned baby Whidehch (inset above, at nine weeks of age) grew into a savvy six-month-old. Once she was capable of readily dispatching a native wood rat for dinner, Whidehch was ready for the wild (opposite).

MARK HIGLEY/HOOPA TRIBAL FORESTRY; REBECCA GREEN/HOOPA TRIBAL FORESTRY (OPPOSITE)



While getting a sense for the smells of the Hoopa forest, Whidehch (right) leaves her first set of tracks as a wild fisher.



MARK HIGLEY/HOOPA TRIBAL FORESTRY

tree limbs and ducking in and out of hollow logs. Occasionally, a misstep would send her tumbling off a slippery limb but she'd dart right back up.

Our fisher project crew enjoyed watching Whidehch's antics, but we couldn't spare the time for the rigorous observation schedule required to assess her progress. Micaela Szykman Gunther, a behavioral ecologist at Humboldt State University, and her student Michelle Schroeder volunteered to help. They watched Whidehch for many hours during her three-month stay at the zoo, paying special attention to her hunting skills. Initially, they tested her with lab mice, then introduced her to full-size lab rats. She became more adept each day, making her kills faster and faster.

By summer, we decided to expand Whidehch's world. We chose a remote creek bottom surrounded by dense alder and Douglas fir to build a large, outdoor pen in the middle of her mother's former home range on the reservation. On September 12, Whidehch moved in, under Michelle's supervision. The youngster still had a few tests to pass.

Her next challenge was to take on the much larger native wood rats and ground squirrels that fishers hunt in the wild. By now, Whidehch was accustomed to the lackluster escape attempts of the mice and rats that slid down the feeding tube at mealtimes. As soon as lunch landed, she would deliver the fatal blow. As a matter of fact, we were sure it was only a matter of time before she put her mouth around the end of the feeding tube and wait for the delivery.

Her first experience with a wild wood rat was an entirely different story. The rat hit the ground running. This alone was a surprise to Whidehch, sending her blasting through a pool of water in hot pursuit. She caught up with her prey at the far end of the pool, but the wood rat did not give up easily. It turned its head and snapped at Whidehch's flank, but she quickly adjusted her angle of attack and drove in her teeth.

On October 3, a tentative but curious six-month-old Whidehch made her first tracks on Hoopa soil as a wild fisher. She took several slow laps around her pen and did

a lot of sniffing. Meanwhile, about a dozen proud onlookers from WCS, Humboldt Wildlife Care Center, Humboldt State University, Hupa Tribal Forestry, and Sequoia Park Zoo snapped hundreds of photographs. This "little sister" had touched the hearts of many. Then she bounded along a log and disappeared into the forest. The radio collar Whidehch wore allowed us to track her movements just as we had once followed her mother.

For the next two weeks, we provided food at the release site in case she needed it. Remotely triggered cameras were in place to record visits, but she never came back. She spent the next nine weeks within a couple of miles of the pen.

On December 3, Whidehch began moving northwest. She left the Hoopa Valley Indian Reservation on December 10, continuing in a northwesterly direction. Given the timing and distances she was covering, we suspected that she was leaving behind her mother's home range and striking out on her own. She seemed to be settling into an area that borders Redwood National and State Parks and private timberland owned by Green Diamond Resource Company. She had traveled a straight-line distance of approximately eight miles from where she was born. We collected a half dozen locations for her between December 13 and December 27. Then on December 30, she slipped out of her collar while investigating a bees' nest in a hollow log. The area would soon be snowed in for winter and inaccessible, so we decided not to try to re-collar her.

As I retell Whidehch's story, it amazes me that despite all the human intervention that took place, Whidehch headed out into unexplored territory as would any young fisher of her age. Because logging and other development pressures have brought Pacific fishers to the brink of extinction, giving special attention to one individual seems to us well worth the collective effort. I sincerely hope Whidehch will prosper and raise many fisher litters of her own.

Sean Matthews directs the Hoopa Valley Fisher Project for the Wildlife Conservation Society.