

Wolverines vanished from California a century ago. Is it time to bring them back?

March 12 2024, by Lila Seidman, Los Angeles Times



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Wolverines could be poised for a comeback in California. A new bill seeks to reintroduce the solitary, muscular carnivores to the state's mountainous regions, where they were hunted, poisoned and trapped into

oblivion more than 100 years ago.

Wolverines are exceedingly rare in the lower 48 states and received federal protection under the Endangered Species Act in November. California's conservation efforts date back to the early 1970s, when wolverines were designated as a fully protected species under the state Fish and Game Code and listed as threatened under the state Endangered Species Act.

Several sightings of an elusive wolverine in May in California's High Sierra sparked a flurry of excitement. It was reportedly the second spotted in the Golden State in a century.

"While wolverines are solitary and live at [higher elevations](#), California is part of their natural home territory, and seeing them here shouldn't be that rare and won't be in the future if we manage reintroduction carefully," said Assemblymember Laura Friedman, D-Glendale, who introduced the California legislation.

Friedman, a front-runner for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, called the bill, AB 2722, "an important first step to making that future a reality."

The Center for Biological Diversity sponsored the bill.

Wolverines resemble diminutive bears but are the largest member of the weasel family, weighing up to 40 pounds. They possess powerful jaws capable of taking down predators far larger than themselves. Snowshoe-like feet allow them to cruise over deep powder, and they're known to traverse large distances. They're renowned loners, with males occupying territories of up to 500 square miles.

"They're like the patron animal of mountaineers, skiers and introverts,"

said Rebecca Watters, executive director of the Wolverine Foundation. "They like hanging out by themselves, and they run around in the mountains all the time."

No one has tried to bring the animal back to areas from which it vanished, but two states are exploring the possibility. Less than three weeks after California's bill was introduced in mid-February, Colorado lawmakers proposed legislation to reintroduce wolverines.

Proponents in both states have said there is plenty of habitat to accommodate the animals, which naturally live in low density in snowy, high-elevation areas. But some researchers would prefer to see the species propagate naturally, expressing concern that wolverines will die during the reintroduction process, while there's no guarantee of success.

If AB 2722 passes, it won't immediately trigger an effort to bring the animals back. Instead, it would provide policymakers with data that could inform a future effort.

The proposed legislation directs the California Department of Fish and Wildlife to "conduct a feasibility study on a supplementation or reintroduction program, with the goal of reestablishing a viable population of the species in California," according to a news release.

The work would be carried out as part of a planned status assessment for wolverines required by a law passed last year. SB 147 requires CDFW to develop a plan to assess the population status of each fully protected species by July 1, 2024; wolverines are one of the animals on the list.

Prior to last year, the last wolverine sighting in California was in 2018. That animal, nicknamed "Buddy," is believed to have traveled from Idaho.

David Garcelon, president of Institute for Wildlife Studies, hopes the California bill will succeed, even as he described reintroductions as "always a little bit chance-y."

For 20 years, Garcelon has looked into bringing back the animals, which he calls "an icon of wilderness." Garcelon, who has experience reintroducing other species, spent 10 years composing a document exploring the feasibility of bringing wolverines back to California, which he shared with state wildlife officials.

To alleviate concerns for the animals' well-being, his plan entailed commissioning trappers who have permits to kill wolverines in places where they still roam, such as British Columbia and the Yukon, to bring him live animals.

"So basically I'm translocating and releasing a wolverine that otherwise would have been a hat," Garcelon said.

He'd release a small number of wolverines at first, in the ballpark of eight to 12, to see what would happen. To entice female wolverines to stay put, he might affix roadkill deer carcasses to trees. Then he'd release males, which might linger when they noticed "lady wolverines" in the area, he said.

However, without a permit from the state, he was not able to move forward. He said he has since presented his ideas to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which last year listed wolverines as threatened.

"I really want to give the wolverines a chance," Garcelon said, adding that with uncertainties posed by [climate change](#) and other factors, "I'm not really in favor of waiting another 50 years to see if they can do it on their own."

Watters, of the Wolverine Foundation, is critical of reintroduction efforts. When animals are moved, she said, some inevitably die—while punching holes in the population from which they're taken.

"We always prefer to see natural dispersal," she said. "And we know that wolverines do this." She pointed to their rebound in the Rocky and Cascade mountains over the last 50 years after being "knocked all the way back to Canada." Young males have struck out into California and Colorado, but neither state has an established population.

If reintroduction is attempted, it could answer questions about whether old laws can be applied to new threats.

Wolverines, she said, will serve as "a test case for whether or not the Endangered Species Act is equipped to actually face the question of conservation" amid climate change.

According to Watters, the law was intended to protect animals from isolated threats, like hunting or trapping. But climate change is systemic. She said seeing how the tools are applied to high-alpine, snow-dwelling [wolverines](#) will lay bare whether they're adequate.

"These attempts at reintroduction are sort of on the edge of the questions that are going to be coming at a lot of species in the next century," she said.

2024 Los Angeles Times. Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: Wolverine vanished from California a century ago. Is it time to bring them back? (2024, March 12) retrieved 5 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-03-wolverines-california-century.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private

study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.