

Step aside, wolves: The next Colorado wildlife reintroduction could be the elusive wolverine

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Colorado could return another native carnivore to its mountains if state lawmakers pass a bill allowing for the reintroduction of wolverines.

The bipartisan bill "if passed" would allow Colorado Parks and Wildlife to accomplish a decades-old goal to restore the elusive and wide-roaming weasel to the state.

"Colorado is the right state to take on this work," Colorado Parks and Wildlife Director Jeff Davis said in a news release. "The North American wolverine requires a high-elevation habitat with persistent, deep snowpack, and Colorado has some of the best remaining unoccupied wolverine habitat in the lower 48 states."

The 40-pound weasels wander broad swaths of high alpine territory extending up to 600 square miles and can cover up to 15 miles a day. Wolverines primarily feed on carcasses but will also kill rabbits, rodents and other small animals. Occasionally, they kill livestock. Wolverines are not related to wolves, despite similar sounding names.

Reintroduction would likely take several years if the bill passes. State wildlife officials must complete a federal process to create management guidelines for the threatened species.

"If the bill passes, a number of items will need to be tended to before wolverines could be released and it is difficult to project how long each item might take," Colorado Parks and Wildlife spokesman Travis Duncan said. "For instance, a 10(j) ruling will have to be published by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service before a reintroduction could proceed, and that process alone could take a few years."

Wolverines once roamed from the Sierra Nevada in California to the

Rocky Mountains but were nearly exterminated from the lower 48 states by the early 1900s as large game herds decreased and people poisoned carcasses to kill wolves, bears, coyotes and [mountain lions](#).

Large populations remained in Canada and Alaska and the wide-roaming species have since reestablished in Washington, Montana, Idaho, Wyoming and Oregon. Biologists estimate there are approximately 300 wolverines in the lower 48 and thousands in Canada and Alaska.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife biologists estimate that up to 180 wolverines could live in the stateâ€"a significant increase to the population in the contiguous United States.

Wolverines require habitat with deep and long-lasting snowpackâ€"territory that will become harder to find as [climate change](#) shortens winters, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Colorado is expected to retain its snowpack better than lower-elevation mountains across the West and could provide a key refuge for the species, state biologists have said.

Federal officials in November deemed wolverines a [threatened species](#) under the Endangered Species Act in the lower 48 states, citing [habitat loss](#) and climate change as threats to the species.

"The tenacious wolverine can thrive by scavenging in a harsh world of snow and ice but is defenseless against the looming threat of human-caused climate change and loss of snowpack," Michael Saul, Rockies and Plains program director for Defenders of Wildlife, said in a news release. "That's why it's so important for the survival of the species that Colorado moves forward with returning these animals to the high mountains of the state, where we can help give them a fighting chance at survival."

Wolverines have not been seen in Colorado since 1919, except for one lone critter who wandered through the state between 2009 and 2012. That [wolverine](#) traveled 585 miles over a few months from the northwest corner of Wyoming to the mountains outside Breckenridge. It later wandered to North Dakota, where it was shot and killed.

State biologists began considering reintroducing the species in the 1990s, but shelved the plan in favor of reintroducing lynx. Colorado Parks and Wildlife in 2010 crafted a plan for the reintroduction, which is now being revised. That update is in its final stages of review and agency leaders expect to finalize the plan soon, Duncan said.

"This legislation will provide the nation's top wildlife agency and wildlife professionals the right method to reintroduce a species," said Sen. Perry Will, a Republican who is sponsoring the bill. "Let's manage the wildlife resources of Colorado the correct way through scientific wildlife management. I am excited to see this through."

The bill requires Colorado Parks and Wildlife to create a plan to reimburse livestock owners for any injuries or killings by wolverines, though it acknowledges such attacks are "extremely rare."

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