Wolverines return to Mount Rainier National Park after 100 years

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Mount Rainier National Park is now home to wolverines again after a more than 100-year hiatus.

A reproducing female, named Joni, and her two babies, called kits, were

discovered by scientists of the Cascades Carnivore Project in collaboration with the National Park Service, according to a recent announcement. To make the rare and historic discovery last week, scientists used camera stations designed to photograph the animals and identify them using their uniquely patterned chest markings.

"It's really, really exciting," Chip Jenkins, superintendent of Mount Rainier National Park, said in a news release. "It tells us something about the condition of the park—that when we have such large-ranging carnivores present on the landscape that we're doing a good job of managing our wilderness."

Wolverines look like small bears, but they're actually the largest member of the weasel family. But seeing one in the wild is becoming extremely rare in the U.S.

There's an estimated 300 to 1,000 wolverines living in the Lower 48 states of the U.S., according to the National Park Service. Wolverines used to live as far south as California, Utah and Colorado, but their population has receded north over the last 100 years, according to The Wolverine Foundation.

"Many species that live at high elevation in the Pacific Northwest, such as the wolverine, are of particular conservation concern due to their unique evolutionary histories and their sensitivity to climate change," Dr. Jocelyn Akins, founder of the Cascades Carnivore Project, said in a statement. "They serve as indicators of future changes that will eventually affect more tolerant species and, as such, make good models for conservation in a changing world."

Since 2008, the Cascades Carnivore Project has conducted scientific research and conservation efforts on rare and at-risk carnivore species, including the wolverine. Volunteers and scientists with the project, led

by Akins, helped make the discovery at Mount Rainier possible, the National Park Service news release said.

Wolverines need snowpack to den their young, just like Joni and her two kits discovered at Rainier. But as climate change threatens these fragile ecosystems, wolverines are finding themselves living in more hostile conditions.

In a recent report Akins authored for Columbia Insight, an environmental publication, she said genetic analysis of wolverines living in the South Cascades match up with populations in the North Cascades. That means these animals had to cross Interstate 90 to begin recolonizing the South Cascades.

These solitary creatures require a lot of room to roam. In places with high-quality habitat, an area of 600 square miles is likely to be home to an estimated 6.2 wolverines.

The particular locations of the den and camera stations used to make the discovery at Rainier are not being released to protect the animals from possible disturbances, according to park officials. But future parkgoers don't need to view this announcement with fear, officials said.

"Wolverines are solitary animals and despite their reputation for aggressiveness in popular media, they pose no risk to park visitors," said Dr. Tara Chestnut, wildlife ecologist for the National Park Service. "If you are lucky enough to see one in the wild, it will likely flee as soon as it notices you."

To learn more about wolverines and community-based science efforts to protect these animals, visit Cascades Carnivore Project and their partners at Cascades Wolverine Project.

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