

Fisher cat invasion – reality or urban legend?

By Michaela Kennedy

The name fisher cat is a misnomer. A fisher cat is not a cat, and it rarely eats fish. Nevertheless, this beastly carnivore, kin to minks and weasels, has struck a chord of terror in local cat owners – and even some dog owners – on the island.

The Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management has received several calls in the last few months from distressed pet owners in Jamestown whose cats have gone missing. “But they don’t do anything,” said Pat Munafo about DEM’s lackluster response. Munafo, who lives on 100 acres of woods and marshland, lost two cats within a nine-day period earlier this season.

Munafo, along with many other islanders who live outside the village, is convinced that fishers have set up residence on Conanicut. Munafo and her husband have spotted fishers twice along North Main Road in the last few months, they claim. “You’d almost think you’re seeing a mink or a weasel,” she says.

Encyclopaedia research shows that fishers have large retractable claws, which make them able climbers. With hind feet that can rotate almost 180 degrees, they adeptly descend trees headfirst. They are known to speed up the trunk of a tree and rip apart a bird or squirrel’s nest in search of a meal.

Munafo notes a significant drop in the number of small critter sightings on her property and in the neighboring area. “There are



The fisher cat boasts a set of dangerous teeth.

no squirrels, no skunks, no rabbits around. I can’t say for sure that’s what is killing the small animals; but when you have no squirrels, it’s an indication,” she explains.

Sally Garnett of Longfellow Road also had her cat go missing last summer. She remembers seeing her pet in the yard late in the afternoon, “and that was it.” Garnett notes that a neighbor on Alden Avenue had the same experience about the same time.

In spite of the local brouhaha, DEM wildlife biologist Charles Brown is not convinced that the marten-relative has made it to the islands of Newport County. Brown explains that a fisher may easily be mistaken for other mustelidae. “We have mink and river otters, which

have been sighted on Jamestown,” he says.

Fishers are fairly new on the Rhode Island scene, notes Brown, though they are common throughout New England. The animals populated the region a few hundred years ago, but were unceremoniously eradicated as a result of urban expansion and trappings

for the fur trade in the 1880s. They have made a comeback, and the first DEM confirmation of their existence in the state was a reported road kill in 1985, in Richmond.

Brown also notes that while fishers have been confirmed in Washington County and Tiverton, none have been proven to be on Aquidneck or Conanicut islands. A road kill or a trapped animal would substantiate the claims, he adds.

The shy, elusive fishers are rarely seen, even in areas where they are abundant, according to DEM. They can be active day or night, and remain active year round with no hibernation. Since the woodland creatures hesitate to cross open space, Brown doubts the hypothesis that fishers have used the bridges to migrate to the islands, “although anything is possible.”

Another rumor spreading through the area is that people have trapped fishers in other communities and released them here. “Even if it were true, a few fishers released by someone do not constitute a population,” Brown adds.

With that said, local wildlife biologist Numi Mitchell confirms sightings of critter control compa-

nies that release creatures in other places, an illegal practice that she says should stop. “I’ve seen people releasing animals by the side of the road right over in Saunderson,” she says, adding credence to the plausibility of the same activity happening here.

Town Councilwoman Barbara Szeponowski sees a bigger problem, lying with the irresponsibility of dog and cat owners that leave their pets unattended. “I wish we could educate people about better care of their pets,” she says. “Don’t leave your cats out at night. And if your cat or dog goes out, you should go with it.”

One thing local citizens and state officials agree on is to remove any potential food source that the weasel-like creatures could get into. Fishers will eat just about anything, and will return to hunting spots where they’ve had success. Bird feeding, for example, attracts small mammals, which in turn may attract fishers. Securing potential meals like trash, garbage, compost, and pet food is important as well.

Opera and chamber music featured in URI concerts

The University of Rhode Island Music Department will serenade listeners with two concerts on Sunday, Nov. 18.

URI’s Opera Workshop, directed by Rene de la Garza, will present a one-act comic opera, “The Impresario,” by Mozart, with the remainder of the program featuring scenes from Mozart’s opera, “The Magic Flute” and a variety of popular arias and songs by other famous composers at 3 p.m.

The focus will be on chamber music (written for small groups of musicians) as at least nine differ-

ent URI Chamber Ensembles perform works ranging from Bach to contemporary composer Catherine McMichael, at 7 p.m.

Both concerts will be held in the Fine Arts Center Concert Hall off Upper College Road on URI’s Kingston campus. Admission for each program is \$8 for the general public, \$2 for students, with seating on a first-come basis. The box office opens 45 minutes before the start of each concert.

For more information, call the URI Music Department at 874-2431.

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