



NATURE AT RISK

By Carol Hillestad for the Brodhead Watershed Association

Restoring the Life of the Forest

December 2023

Europeans arriving here in the 1600s faced wilderness like nothing they had ever seen before.

The ancient forests looked infinite — dark, deep, ominous — climbing over seemingly endless miles of ridges and valleys, full of fast-running creeks. Wolves, moose and elk, black bears, cougar, and wild cats ruled.

Unlike indigenous people who lived in balance with the land, the newcomers felt a need to control this new world, a need to tame it.

“Taming” the wilderness ended up leveling it. Clearings for family crops led to villages, towns, cities. By the late 1800s, the forest was gone, clear cut all across Pennsylvania.

Chestnut, hemlock and oak were valuable for ships masts, tanning, railroad ties, and buildings. But all that lost forest was also necessary to wildlife. What with unregulated hunting, and nothing left to live on but dead stumps and scrub, most creatures moved out, or died.

No birdsong in spring. No elk bugling their eerie call along the Brodhead Creek. No wolves howling on the hunt for moose. No deer or turkeys or other prey for cougars and coyotes.

About 100 years ago, people began to recognize all that they had lost. Forests became valued for themselves again. And, as you know just by looking around you, the woods have returned.

With the woods restored, some species that were decimated, like the white-tailed deer, rebounded readily. Some that were extirpated — completely driven out, like turkeys, beaver, elk, eagle, and bobcat — have been re-introduced.

The native American pine marten is still waiting its turn.

Never heard of it? Not surprising since they’ve been gone from our woodlands for over a century. But in forests like ours, this relative of the mink is important — martens keep rodents like mice and voles in check, eat plants and spread their seeds, and are themselves a food source for owls and eagles.

The American marten has been called “an icon of the wilderness.” And thanks to the Pennsylvania Game Commission, they may be on the verge of a comeback: In 2024, the Game Commission is on track to reintroduce this essential part of our forest ecosystem, like turkeys and bobcat before them.

Will you soon be seeing martens along every trail? Unlikely. They require wild, undeveloped areas and avoid humans. But isn’t it uplifting to know they’re coming home?

For more information:

By the 1890s, Pennsylvania’s formerly glorious forest was in tatters. Responsible hunters were revolted by reckless hunters and trappers decimating game, and called for regulation. The Game Commission was created in 1895 in response, restoring and managing the Commonwealth’s natural resources.

<https://www.pgc.pa.gov/InformationResources/AboutUs/Pages/default.aspx>

Check out the Nature at Risk archive on our updated website <https://brodheadwatershed.org/nature-at-risk/>



American martens are mainly nocturnal and are excellent climbers, spending most of their time in trees. They are solitary and only tolerate other martens in mating season. (Photo: PA Game Commission)