

# ANIMALS BEHAVING BADLY

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WALKER  
BOOKS



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# INTRODUCTION

ANIMALS are clever. They may not drive cars or operate computers, build skyscrapers or make videos on YouTube, but they are clever in the ways they have adapted to survive in every kind of habitat, all over our planet. We need submarines to explore the sea's depths, but a sperm whale can dive to the bottom of the ocean as easily as we'd run down a flight of stairs. Without water we would die within days in the middle of a hot desert, but a kangaroo rat can live all its life without drinking. We would need a powerful saw to open the seedpods of



the Brazil nut tree,  
but an agouti's  
teeth can do it in  
moments. Adaptations  
like these don't happen

overnight. It takes a lot of time, thousands or even millions of years of evolution, for animals' bodies and behaviours to become so well adapted to their environment and way of life.

Sadly, we humans are changing the planet around us so fast that there isn't time for animals to adapt to the changes we make to the places where *they* live. All over the world, all sorts of different kinds of animals are disappearing because of what humans are doing – cutting down forests, polluting rivers and seas, even changing the climate! I don't know about you, but this makes me very sad and very cross. So I'm always happy to hear about animals that can get the better of humans, and manage to survive in spite of all we do to make their lives difficult and dangerous. This book is about some of those creatures. Humans say these animals are behaving badly – and a lot of other nasty things

besides – because they get in our way. But the truth is, they are just surviving and being clever at it. The only really badly behaved animal on Earth is *us*.

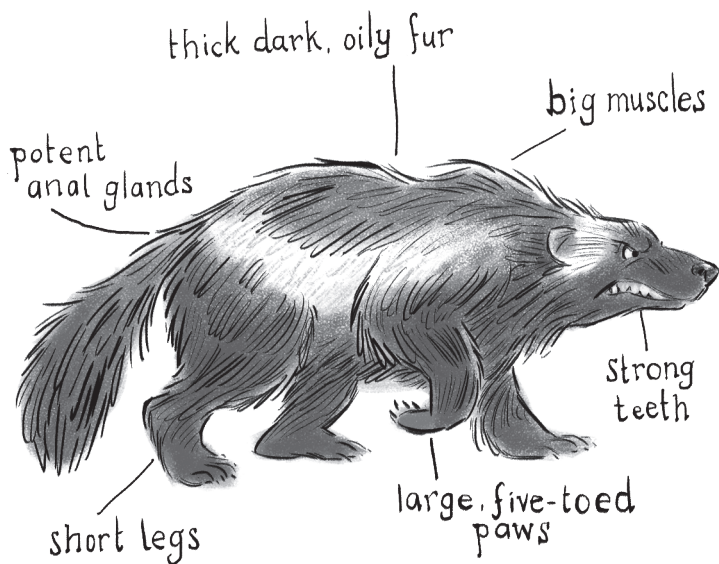




# Demon Wolverines

**Y**OU might not know what a wolverine is, so let me introduce you. Imagine a low-slung, weaselly sort of a beast, about the size of a Labrador dog. OK so far? Now, make its legs a bit longer and its fur thicker and shaggier.

There! You've got a wolverine!



If what you have in your mind doesn't look particularly impressive to you, then prepare to be surprised...

Near Point Hope in Alaska, in the early spring of 1944, an Inuit hunter was out on the sea ice when he saw a big male polar bear. The human and the bear were searching for the same thing – seals – but the bear found a wolverine instead. The bear, like you perhaps, was not impressed. How much trouble could an animal a twentieth of its size cause? It snarled and took a lazy lunge at the big weasel.

The bear clearly didn't know much about wolverines. But it soon learnt. Instead of running off, the wolverine leapt at the bear, clamped its jaws around its windpipe, and held on until the bear was dead. An animal weighing less than a six-year-old child had just taken out the biggest land-living carnivore on Earth.



This was a surprise for the polar bear, but not for the Inuit, because although wolverines don't usually hunt on the sea ice, they have a reputation that every hunter in the far north knows.

Wolverines live from Alaska to Greenland, from Norway to the Chukchi Peninsula in Siberia: wherever the winters are long and cruel, and snow lies deep on the ground from autumn to spring. They are known to be solitary, fierce and fearless; there are reports of lone wolverines seeing off a grizzly bear or a pack of wolves. They are known to have the strength of a much larger animal; a wolverine can drag a deer carcass halfway up a mountain. And they are known for something else, too: their ability to get the better of human beings.

They are said to be "spiteful" and "devilish"; they will destroy traps and wreck human homes and food stores. "Fiend", "demon", "devil" and

“vandal” are just some of the not very complimentary words that people have used to describe wolverines.

I first got interested in wolverines when I was a little kid, because I read another true story called “Arch Criminal of the Wild”. It went like this. In the north of Canada, around Hudson Bay, a Cree hunter was making his living by trapping animals like foxes, beavers, pine martens and wolverines, and selling their fur. Many people did that back then and a few still do today. A wolverine moved into the trapper’s area, ripped apart every single one of the many steel traps he had set to catch animals for their fur, and killed his dog. One night, while he was sleeping, it got into his cabin and chewed through his store of furs. It gobbled up his food and what it didn’t eat, it left ruined by the horrible stink of its musky scent glands. It dragged his gun off into

the woods and, finally, shredded his snowshoes, which made it very difficult for him to struggle back through the snow to town and replace all he'd lost.

You could easily see this as a tall story, made up as an excuse for human mistakes – a lost gun, some broken traps – but stories like this were common. So common that a company that bought furs from hunters across Canada had a handbook for all trappers that said:

“When a wolverine moves into his territory, a trapper has but two alternatives: he must trap the wolverine or give up trapping.”

The trappers of course thought wolverine trap-wrecking and food-spoiling was “wicked”, but even as a little kid I was on the side of the wolverines. It seemed to me quite fair to destroy the traps, weapons and food stores of someone who was out to kill you and your kind. I especially

loved the part of that story where the snowshoes get wrecked and the gun disappears. But did the wolverine really know what it was doing?

Probably not. Wolverines survive by being able to eat anything, alive or dead. They'll catch small mammals, eat eggs, gobble up any dead body they come across. They'll chew on old skin and their jaws are so strong that they can crunch their way through bones and eat the bits just as you would eat a bag of crisps. As they can never be sure where their next meal is coming from, they can eat *a lot*. Their scientific name, *gulo gulo*, means "glutton" twice over! They're territorial too – they don't want to share the food on their patch. Like many mammals, their way of saying "this is mine" is to scent-mark it by squeezing the stinky, oily contents of their glands (which are like little pockets round their bottoms), all over the food.

Another way to see that wolverine's "devilish" raid on the Cree trapper is this: the wolverine found dead animals – in other words, ready-meals – in the traps. So, when it broke the traps it was simply taking the wrapper off its dinner. The food in the store was just another easy meal, and scent-marking it a way of saying "this is my nosh now". Perhaps, with the smell of human all round, the wolverine was also anxious, which would have made the scent-marking extra stinky. What about chomping the snowshoes and carrying off the gun? Well, back then snowshoes were strung with deerskin – more wolverine snacks. And the gun perhaps looked like some weird kind of bone that the wolverine could bury in the woods to eat later. As for the poor old dog, he probably just looked at Mr Wolverine the wrong way.

Seen like this, it isn't the behaviour of a



demon, taking revenge on an enemy, but that of a hungry animal trying to make the most of an opportunity. Wolverines aren't wicked or spiteful. They're just getting on with surviving in a tough environment. However, their extraordinary ability to survive gives one group of humans a very hard time indeed, and that's the scientists who study them.

Jeff Copeland, a wildlife biologist who has spent much of his life trying to find out more about wolverines, described researching them as like "shadowing a ghost". Wolverines are always moving to find food; their strategy seems to be: "if you cover enough ground you're sure to find something to eat eventually". Wolverine territories can be huge: more than twice the size of the Isle of Wight, five times bigger than Staten Island, and they can cover 20 miles in a day and be 500 miles away in a month.

Mountains mean nothing to them; they can climb sheer cliffs and disappear into the next valley in hours. Wolverines can cope with this constant marathon because they have extra big hearts and lungs. Their bodies burn up food to produce energy faster than other animals of the same size. Huge feet spread their weight, so they can run over snow without sinking in and their long claws act like the metal spikes that hikers and climbers have on their boots, so they can scramble up ice-covered slopes.

All this makes wolverines extremely difficult to follow. No human can keep up with them on foot and of course they don't live in places where there are many roads. So for years, pretty much all that people knew about them was their reputation: *the demon vandal that walks alone*. The invention of electronic tracking devices small enough to be attached to animals' bodies

and powerful enough to beam signals over several miles, gave scientists a chance to find out more for the first time.

But to use a tracking device, you first have to catch a wolverine.

A wolverine trap needs to be strong. When you're making one, your first move is to cut down some trees. Big trees. Then you chop them up and make a sort of mini log cabin. The logs that form the walls must be joined together tightly, with no gaps, or the wolverine will chew its way out. The log lid must be heavy to keep the demon beast inside. Mark Scafford is studying wolverines in Alberta, Canada – when I asked him, "How heavy?" he told me, "Oh, about one hundred pounds. Maybe more? One hundred and twenty?" That's a weight of 100 pounds to keep an animal that weighs less than 40 pounds inside.

To set the trap, you lift the lid (feeling strong?). It will fall when the wolverine pulls on the bait, a juicy bit of dead beaver attached to a strong steel wire at the back of the trap. When that happens, the gadget you've attached to the lid will send a *bleep* to your phone, telling you the trap is sprung.

Now, all you need to do is to get a wild wolverine to go inside. Hopefully you've built your trap somewhere where there are likely to be wolverines – out on a mountain where you've already seen their tracks. But your trap is just one place in a wolverine territory that could stretch out for miles in every direction. How will they find it? Smell! The smelliest smell you can make. Mix up some skunk extract (yes, there really is something called "skunk extract", a liquid that smells like skunks), beaver oil and rancid fish oil, put it in a container and string it high in a

tree where the wind can spread that *delicious* pong on the breeze. With luck, the fine-tuned wolverine nose will pick it up from miles away.

But the sense of smell that brings the wolverine to the trap will also pick up *your* scent



on it. Any wolverine that turns up will be very, very wary.

Let's face it, your chances of success are pretty slim. You're going to have to make and set a lot of traps. You have long days and nights of work ahead of you, in freezing conditions. Oh and, I forgot to say: all of this has to be done in midwinter, when the bears are asleep, or they'll just steal your bait and wreck your traps. At this time of year, temperatures in wolverine habitats go down to minus 30°C, and lower. Inside its fur coat, the wolverine will be toasty; inside your layers of clothing, you may freeze. You are going to have to become "a person with no quit in them", as folk say in wolverine country.

If you get really lucky, the lure of a free meal may be too much for a hungry wolverine to resist. A *bleep* sounds on your phone, telling you the trap is sprung! From that moment

the clock is ticking. You have to get to that trap before the wolverine finds its way out. No matter what time of day or night, no matter how bad the conditions, you have to get there, even if it means skiing through a blizzard for two hours in the middle of the night. When you arrive at the trap, you'll hear a deep, angry growling that will make your hair stand on end. This is the creature that sees off bears, remember. It survives by being able to stand up to *anything*. It is an animal "with no quit in it". And it's in your trap. How on Earth are you going to get it out and put a radio tag on it?

Very, very carefully you lift the lid of the trap (still feeling strong?). The wolverine may jam its snout through the gap, revealing an impressive set of teeth. That's when you jab it with an anaesthetic syringe, attached to the end of a long stick. You drop the lid and wait. Some

wolverines are so tough they need more than one dose to put them to sleep.

Once you're *sure* it's asleep, you lift it out very carefully and attach the collar with the radio-tracking device inside. It will track the wolverine's position for as long as the battery lasts. You put the sleepy demon back in the trap to recover safely.

Later, at dawn perhaps, as you watch the wolverine climb out of the trap (probably carrying the beaver bait if it hasn't eaten it all already), you cross your fingers and hope that it doesn't just rip the collar off and chew it to bits. And all that effort is just the start, because to really find out what wolverines get up to, you need to put tracking devices on more than just one!

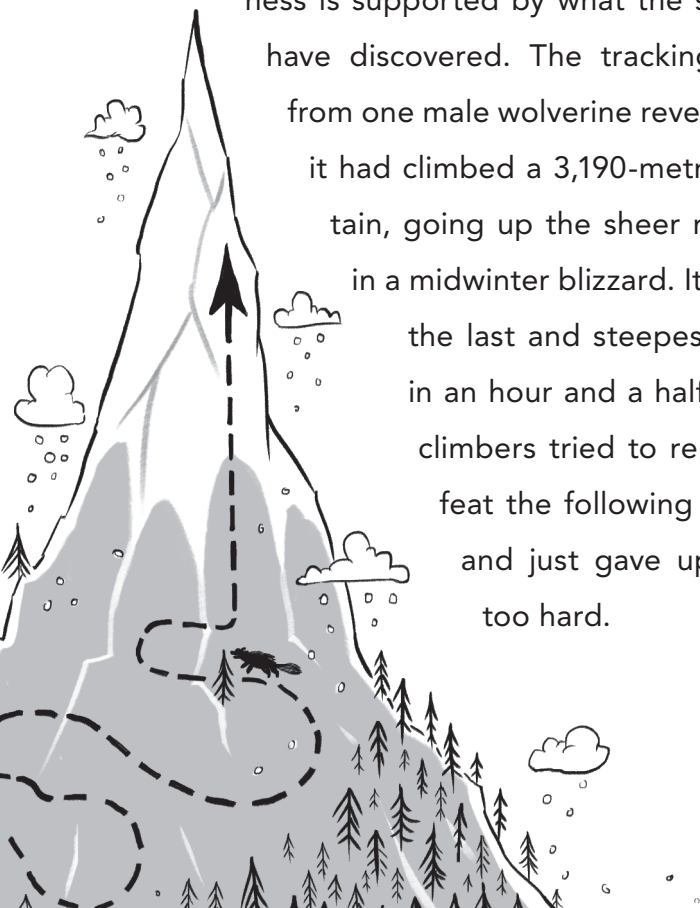
In spite of all the things about wolverines that make them very hard to study, some tough, determined field biologists have stuck with it,





and, over the last two decades, learnt a lot about them. It turns out their reputation for being lonesome has no truth in it. Males and females hang out together sometimes, and their children – called kits – spend time with mum and dad after they grow up. Wolverines even play.

However their reputation for amazing toughness is supported by what the scientists have discovered. The tracking device from one male wolverine revealed that it had climbed a 3,190-metre mountain, going up the sheer rock face in a midwinter blizzard. It covered the last and steepest stretch in an hour and a half. Human climbers tried to repeat this feat the following summer, and just gave up. It was too hard.



As always, no matter how much trouble animals give us, we always give them more. Ever-wandering wolverines need a lot of space, and we humans are filling that wild space with towns and roads, mines and factories. Wolverines need a cold climate and we are making the places where they live ever warmer. So, I'm glad to hear stories about the wildness and mischief of wolverines.

Here's something one wildlife cameraman, John Aitchison, told me. Not long ago, an American Indian hunter called George Wholecheese caught up with a wolverine along a frozen riverbed in Alaska. Wolverine fur is highly prized for being frost-resistant, so when George's snowmobile got stuck in a drift he was disappointed. There wasn't time to reach for his rifle, so he threw an axe at the animal. It missed and landed in the snow.

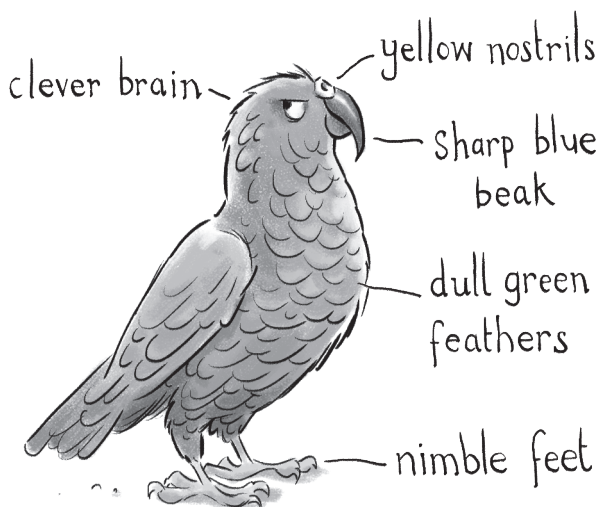
The wolverine sauntered over, peed on the axe and walked off.

As the wolverine biologist Doug Chadwick wrote, "There's wild, and then there's wolverine!"



# Kea Crime

EVERY year, thousands of tourists come to the beautiful mountains of New Zealand's South Island to see the places where the *Lord of the Rings* and *Hobbit* movies were filmed. Of course there are no real Nazgûl or dragons swooping down from the sky, but there is a different kind of winged menace. It's called a kea, and it's one of New Zealand's native parrots. (You can use the same word, kea, for one kea or lots of them – you don't need an "s" on the end.)



Kea don't look like anything special. They're about the size of a crow, and they don't have pretty feathers, just a sort of dull green (though they do have a nifty flash of scarlet under their wings). But if you park your car or pitch your tent in kea country, you might find out the hard way what makes them remarkable. While you're out pretending to be Bilbo or Aragorn striding across the mountain landscape, the kea may pay you a visit. They'll snip the guy ropes of your tent, shred your sleeping bag and then carry off your cooking gear. They'll pull the rubber from your windscreen wipers and from round your car windows; they'll bend the aerial. If they have enough time, they'll peck out the lights and chomp through any loose cables they find. If they get inside the car, by the time you get back, its seats will look as if they've exploded, ripped to shreds with the stuffing pulled out.



This kind of vandalism takes time: a few hours perhaps. But you only have to turn your back for a moment for kea to get up to *something*. One visitor, Peter Marshall from Glasgow, had all his holiday money snatched from his car when a kea leaned in through an open window. Another Scottish visitor lost his passport to a thieving kea. In winter, skiers are forever having their gloves snatched – kea just adore pulling the stuffing out of thermal mitts!

Even when a kea is safely behind bars it can go on giving humans the runaround. In San Diego zoo, a kea called Lucy learnt how to break the lock on her cage – and on all the other birds' cages. Wayne Schulberg, the animal-care manager, arrived one morning to find all the aviaries empty and all the birds flying free.

It's hard to see what a parrot would do with a thousand dollars and a passport, but some kea crimes are easier to understand. Stealing food is their speciality. Kea will fly down chimneys to raid the pantry of a ski lodge while people are out on the slopes. They'll knock over rubbish bins to sort through what's inside and pick out anything yummy. If you leave a window even a tiny bit open they will sample every single thing in your kitchen.

Kea are especially fond of butter and fat, and this has got them into real trouble over the