

Winters with Martini

Martini first showed up four winters ago. I saw him in broad daylight crawling out of my compost bin and pulling out who knows what goodies. Probably a grouse carcass or some fish bones. Then one day at 2 am I was awoken by CA-LUNK! CA-LUNK! out on the porch. He'd found my bag of moose bones a friend had given me that I was going to use to make bone broth. In the light of my headlamp he was lugging off a leg bone at least twice his size. It wasn't hard for me to reclaim it and he watched from the nearest spruce tree, eyes aglow as I tucked the bones away where a marten couldn't get them.

Yes, Martini is a marten and a member of the weasel family, along with weasels, minks, fishers, wolverines, and river otters. Martens range in body length from one and a half to two feet and are just a hair bigger than minks who mostly stick around water while martens prefer uplands and forests. The next largest family member, the fisher, doesn't make it up to Alaska.

Next, Martini ran off with two suet feeders full of suet. So I came up with marten proof designs, one of which meant screwing the feeder right to the tree. Another involved hanging the suet in a mesh bag from the logs that overhung my porch. Even this didn't completely stop him. One morning at 2 am (why does it always have to be 2 am?!) I heard some noise and went downstairs to look. The moonlight was bright enough I could see what he was up to: trying to get up to the suet. Leaping up on some boards that were leaning against the cabin and from there trying to leap to the suet on the underside of a log with a roof on top of it. He failed several times, then momentarily landed on it, but fell off and soon gave up. But in the process he had discovered the windowsill bird feeder nearby. Soon enough he was showing up at irregular hours to eat the highly caloric sunflower seeds.

Watching a carnivore chomp on sunflower seeds is quite humorous. Their long sharp canines are designed for stabbing the jugulars of smaller animals and then tearing apart their flesh. But on reading up about martens I learned that they actually have 38 teeth, most of which are premolars and molars, designed for chomping. That's 6 more teeth than people have and assuming you still have your four wisdom teeth. I could never actually see the molars beyond the canines. The molars are the teeth Martini used to crunch up the sunflower seeds with a rapid opening and closing of his jaw, stabbing the seeds into little bits, many of which just fell back down into the bird feeder and made the redpolls happy. He didn't bother to shell them. Sometimes he'd turn and look in the window toward me with sunflower seed shells plastered to his nose and I burst out laughing. How could I not laugh at this undignified looking predator?

Although martens are carnivore they do have some omnivorous tendencies, even if there isn't a platter of sunflower seeds around. Their primary

food is voles, but they also eat berries, small birds, eggs, and vegetation. A study of marten seasonal food habits in the Upper Susitna valley found that 9% of their diet is red squirrels. I don't feel like they put much of a dent in my red squirrel population. Although the squirrels did seem a bit more short tempered the winters Martini was here. But, hey, with squirrels it can be hard to tell. Martens are also known to use red squirrel midden holes to bed down, a safe place from larger predators. Maybe that's why a squirrel is chattering away in a nearby tree and I thought it was because he got up on the wrong side of his burrow?

Light reddish brown body, orangey-cream neck, white face and ears, dark lower legs and muzzle. I longed to stroke the sleek soft fur, but wouldn't want to stroke the wild out of him anymore than the bird feeder has. Martini was always alert and often rose from his pathetic plop in the bird seed, ears pricked forward, peering out at something, some sound that caught his attention, poised for action, poised to pounce. Sometimes he dashed off into the night and others he returned to the sure bounty beneath his feet.

Being a bit of an insomniac I sometimes get up at 4am. If I can't sleep why not be up? In the days of Martini, I flicked on the desk light and then would jump since there he was in the windowsill also wide awake and active at 4am. But he has a right to be, being mostly a nocturnal animal. I saw him plenty of times in the middle of the day, though, too. Martens don't follow hard and fast rules. They find food when they're hungry and curl up and sleep when they're full. Maybe I'm becoming marten with my erratic sleep patterns. But, unfortunately the resemblance ends there. I wish I could leap lithely through the snow and up trees and chase down squirrels.

Martini never jumped when I turned on the light inside. I could tap on the window and he didn't care. But if heard me open the outside door he ran for the nearest tree.

Martini came to the feeders on and off for two winters.

I'm surprised when friends tell me they've only seen a marten once or twice in their lives. Before Martini showed up I usually saw one once or twice a *year*. I'll never forget the first time I saw a marten. I was 22 and volunteering for the Forest Service in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area of Minnesota. I was out for an evening paddle on Otter Lake and it was getting dark. A growly sound emanated from a large white pine on the lake's edge. I quickly paddled over and right under the overhanging branches from where it sounded like a cat fight was going on. I peered up to see two martens, fighting with tooth and claw, oblivious to anything around them. They bit, clawed and tumbled through the tree branches, landing on lower limbs and resuming the fight. As darkness closed in I reluctantly returned to camp but was supercharged by not just a first animal sighting but some real live action, too.

That's the only time I've seen more than one marten at once. Martens only come together to mate, which occurs in July or August and, as I probably witnessed, to fight over a mate. A male may mate with more than one female. After fertilization there's a period of delayed implantation and an average of three young aren't born until April or May. I decided Martini must be a male since I never saw him with any young at that time of the year. Female martens will start to breed at 15 months of age.

A marten's courage and intelligence is legendary and I experienced it on a canoe trip two summers ago. I paddled along a small quiet slough of the Yukon and was pumped up from just having seen a swimming vole, another animal to add to my list of swimming land mammals. Up ahead I saw something marten-sized bee-lining it across the slough. I turned on the speed, paddling my hardest to catch up to the animal for a good look before it reached the shore and disappeared. I caught up to the animal, alright, but had not accounted for the fact that I had a lot of momentum and was about to run the poor creature over. I tried to back paddle, but the animal dove under the bow of my canoe to avoid being hit, and I slammed onto the beach. Up popped a marten and she was absolutely livid. She proceeded to vent all of her anger at *me*. Not the sixteen foot canoe, but me. She knew who was driving the boat. It was not the boat's fault she almost got run over, it was mine. She reared up out of the water as far as she could and from just 2 feet away, bared every one of her 38 teeth and hissed. I hung my head in shame as I got justly berated. Then she jumped out onto shore, shook herself off and started to head off to the woods. But, no. I had not been reprimanded soundly enough. She turned around, came right down to the water's edge, reared up to her 2 feet of height, and like a spitting cobra, hissed at me again. A long drawn out hiss. Satisfied, she bounded off into the willows and I soon heard the "chips" of song birds alarmed by a predator in their midst. And I added marten to my list of swimming land mammals.

I am half way through a second winter with no Martini. I still glance at the windowsill feeders wistfully, hoping he will pop up suddenly. Or I hope to hear the thump in the middle of the night of him jumping off the feeder onto the deck. It feels lonelier now when I can't sleep at 4am. Even last winter there was some evidence. There were marten tracks that led to my cabin. Once I found seed in the feeder that looked like it had been chewed on by a marten. I held out hope, but he never did materialize. This year, the nearest marten tracks I have found are about a quarter to a half mile away, which is better than nothing. Maybe it's Martini, grown up a bit, better at catching his own food, and decided he's not going to stoop to visiting bird feeders anymore.