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An attitude as big as the high country
Ellen Woodbury *Phantom* (detail) 17x15x18 inches ©Ellen Woodbury
Mongolian Imperial Black Marble on Carrara Marble and Granite

The Intrinsic Value of Wolverines

Ellen Woodbury

I am enamored of wolverines and their mountain peak habitat. I have never seen a wolverine in the wilderness, yet their existence in the high country is extraordinarily important to me. They have an intrinsic value and the right to be here. Period.

I didn't know much about wolverines until I read [The Wolverine Way](#) by Douglas Chadwick. Now I am totally hooked.

Wolverines, the largest members of the weasel family, are designed for winter and live in northern mountain wilderness areas worldwide. Deep snow that lasts for about eight months is essential to the denning and raising of young. They have extreme fur coats, feet the size of snowshoes, claws that act like crampons for scaling icy rock faces, and a very high metabolism. Their scientific name is *Gulo gulo*, which translates to gluttonous glutton. Their high metabolism requires them to eat a lot, and they eat everything, including the bones.

Not much was known about wolverines until biologists began studying them in the 1990's. A team of scientists and naturalists, led by [Jeff Copeland](#), studied wolverines in Glacier National Park from 2002 to 2007. Their goal was to learn as much as possible about wolverines to apply the species for endangered status with the US Fish and Wildlife Service under the Endangered Species Act. Climate change is a direct threat to the continuation of this species. Chadwick's book documents their study.

Male wolverines have territories of more than 300 square miles which they patrol, scent mark, and defend on a regular basis. Female territories are smaller and can overlap with



male territories, but male territories never overlap.

Consequently, there are not a lot of wolverines in an extremely large area.

Females have 2 kits every two years. The first year the kits spend growing up with their mother. The second year the kits travel with their dad through the extreme high country to learn

how to succeed at being wolverines. Their environment is filled with dangerous situations like avalanches, blizzards, and encounters with other apex predators. They need to learn survival skills like how to kill a mountain goat without getting skewered by the sharp horns. The survival rate of young wolverines is not high so wolverine populations increase very slowly.

Feet like snowshoes for running and digging through deep snow, claws like crampons for scaling icy cliffs. **Ellen Woodbury Phantom** (detail) 17x15x18 inches Mongolian Imperial Black Marble on Carrara Marble and Granite
© Ellen Woodbury

Wolverines were nearly wiped out in the contiguous US by humans in the early 20th century, along with wolves, grizzly bears, and mountain lions. One hundred years later humans continue to be the main predator of wolverines.

Wolverines are small animals, weighing up to about 30 pounds. They are very smart, and extremely creative [problem-solvers](#). One wolverine (not part of the Glacier study) hid in a tree along a deer path, then dropped down out of the tree onto a deer's back in order to take it down. (They weigh only 30 pounds, remember!) They are fearless, and will challenge a grizzly bear for its kill. They have boundless energy due to their high metabolism and scale avalanche chutes as if they were traveling on flat ground. They embrace life and don't quit, and I find this very inspiring.



An attitude as big as the high country **Ellen Woodbury Phantom** (detail) 17x15x18 inches, Mongolian Imperial Black Marble on Carrara Marble and Granite. © Ellen Woodbury

Biologists have repeatedly applied the wolverine for endangered status with the USFWS since the 1990's. In 2014 it looked like they would win, but the decision was reversed for some reason. A court [ruling](#) in April, 2016, determined that the USFWS had been "arbitrary and capricious" in its 2014 decision to withdraw proposed protections for wolverines. The judge ordered the USFWS to return to the hearing process on endangered status. The judge's decision emphasized the scientifically proven threat to wolverines from global warming and the unacceptability of political pressure to ignore science. A decision on endangered status is expected in 2018.

I sculpted *Phantom* in order to increase awareness of the remarkable nature of the wolverine. A portion of the proceeds from its sale will be donated to help win endangered status for wolverines so we can protect and foster these outrageous and awesome animals. Wolverines are elusive, and I may never see one in the wild, although there was a least one in the Colorado Rockies from 2009 through 2012. Sadly, this individual was shot and killed in North Dakota in May, 2016.

Animals do not need to serve a purpose for humans in order to exist. There is joy in diversity, unrelated to us.



Phantom at the completion of carving and before the hand finishing begins.

The PBS [Nature](#) documentary, [Wolverine: Chasing the Phantom](#), concludes with a quote by Doug Chadwick that strikes a responsive chord:

"If wolverines have a strategy, it is go hard and high and steep and never back down, not even from a grizzly and least of all from a mountain. Climb everything—trees, cliffs, avalanche chutes, summits. Eat everybody—alive, dead, long dead, with still-warm heart, or frozen bones. I will never know what it is like to be one of these hunter-scavengers, but I have learned a little more about courage, and a lot more about what wild means just from being on the wolverine's trail."



If you have read this far, then you have learned something about the courageous and precarious nature of wolverines. Maybe you can appreciate their intrinsic value and, perhaps, find [strength](#) in their existence. If wolverines are given endangered status, it will protect them and their habitat against human destruction. It will not stop global warming.

Global warming will continue until we stop supporting our economy of greed and unsustainable consumption. Adopt sustainable energy solutions in big ways and in small ways. Let's get this done now, while there is still something worth saving.

(Left) **Ellen Woodbury** *Phantom* 17x15x18 inches, Mongolian Imperial Black Marble on Carrara Marble and Granite. © Ellen Woodbury

[Ellen Woodbury](#) is a one-of-a-kind stone sculptor and carves stylized animals from a variety of white and colored marbles. Her knowledge of poses and movement, gained in her 20-year career as a Directing Animator and Character Animator at Walt Disney Feature Animation, informs the design and composition of her sculptures.

Ellen is a Signature Member of [The Society of Animal Artists](#), [Artists for Conservation](#), a Distinguished Associate



Member of [American Women Artists](#), and an Associate Member of the [National Sculpture Society](#). Her sculpture is juried into national and international shows and is held in private and public collections.

“The sculpture of endangered species is a passion of mine. When the sculpture is sold, I donate a portion of the proceeds to an organization that helps that species to survive. So far I have donated to seven different wildlife organizations (with many more to come) that make an on-the-ground difference in the lives of endangered animals.”

Sources:

The Wolverine Way, Douglas H. Chadwick, Patagonia Books, 2010

Wolverine: Chasing the Phantom, PBS Nature documentary, 2010

The Lone Wolverine, Shaw and Ford, University of Michigan Press, 2012

Behavior of North American Mammals, Elbroch and Rinehart, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011

The Wolverine Foundation Newsletter, gulo@wolverinefoundation.org

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MAHB Blog: <http://mahb.stanford.edu/creative-expressions/intrinsic-value-wolverines/>