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The Cry of the Fisher

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The Cry of the Fisher

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph:

A few years back, while reading The New York Times as I am wont to do (I’m one of the diehards who still insists of getting a hard copy at the campus bookstore every morning) I was startled by a picture illustrating an article with the headline: “A Fierce Predator Makes a Home in the Suburbs.” Below the title was a photo of a ferocious creature attacking a bird feeder, with a diabolical expression on its face that made it look like something that came directly out of the pit of hell.
A few years back, while reading The New York Times as I am wont to do (I’m one of the diehards who still insists of getting a hard copy at the campus bookstore every morning) I was startled by a picture illustrating an article with the headline: “A Fierce Predator Makes a Home in the Suburbs.” Below the title was a photo of a ferocious creature attacking a bird feeder, with a diabolical expression on its face that made it look like something that came directly out of the pit of hell (go to the following website and check it out for yourself, if you dare: http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/10/science/10fish.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

Imagine my surprise when I saw that the beast in question was called a “fisher.” I had no idea that there even was an animal with that name, let alone one with such a distinctive look to it. The article describes fishers thusly: “Sinewy, with bushy tails and beady eyes, fishers weigh 5 to 15 pounds and live on land and in trees. They are mainly carnivorous, typically eating squirrels, mice, voles and other small animals, as well as nuts and seeds. Fishers are also one of the porcupine’s few enemies, killing it by attacking its snout and flipping it on its back” (Katie Zezima, New York Times,
June 10, 2008). A creature willing to take on a porcupine—now that’s one you don’t want to mess with!

The article goes on to say that, while at one time near extinction, the fisher is making a comeback, thanks in large part to its having been reintroduced into various Eastern and Western States in order to, you guessed it, help thin out the porcupine population. Now, thanks to humans moving into the fishers’ habitats, they’ve found a new treat to feast upon: small housepets. “In suburban Lexington, Mass., officials hung flyers in the common area of a condominium complex urging residents to keep cats and small dogs indoors because a fisher was spotted in nearby woods. In Northborough, Mass., officials put a warning in the newspaper asking that residences seal all garbage cans and refrain from putting out food for animals” (Zezima, 2008). And don’t even ask what a fisher does when it comes upon a flock of chickens—it’s not a pretty sight.

While not indigenous to this area, there have been a few fisher sightings in upstate New York in recent years. In late 2010, a 15 year old boy named Ryan Rector caught one in a non-lethal foothold trap along Naples Creek. He thought at first it was a raccoon or a fox, but when he saw the long black tail he recognized it as a male fisher. He released it from the trap and watched it ford the creek and scurry up a snow-covered hill. Shortly thereafter, in March of 2011, a roadkill fatality was found near the Waterloo Premium Outlet Mall and was documented to be a female fisher. John Van Niel, FLCC Professor of Conservation, noted of the two cases that “They were each a different sex so we have concrete proof of two individual animals in the Finger Lakes” (Leo Roth, “Catches Help Keep Tabs on Species”, Democrat and Chronicle, January 23, 2011).

Yet another fisher also “met its Waterloo” three months later near Batavia, in the town of Sweden. A taxidermist named Bill Yox, along with his young son, came across a carcass along Route
Yox immediately recognized it for what it was. “If you’re a taxidermist,” he was quoted, “you’re a roadkill specialist. It’s just the way it is” (Leo Roth, “Fisher, Rare in Monroe County, Found in Sweden”, Democrat and Chronicle, April 6, 2011). This was the first recorded spotting of a fisher in Monroe County. I haven’t found any more recent examples, but perhaps that’s not surprising. Fishers are nocturnal and very hard to spot. If you do see a live one, chances are it’s rabid. Given how mean they are in general, that’s something you really don’t want to experience. Louise Scheuerman of Scotia, New York did, and had to fight it off with a fire extinguisher. The fisher in question was tracked and killed by the police, and it was determined to indeed be rabid. “Ms. Scheuerman sustained nerve damage to her feet and took a series of rabies shots for five weeks. She did not leave her house for more than two weeks after the attack, she said, adding: ‘I was pretty shaky for quite a while. Apparently in 200 years in New York State, I was the second person bit by a rabid fisher. Couldn’t I have won the Lotto? I would have been much nicer’” (Zezima, 2008). As Tennessee Ernie Ford might have put it, if you see a fisher coming, you’d better hide.

I was amazed to learn about this animal sharing the name, in part, of our school. I don’t know what St. John Fisher himself would have thought about this beast, but I must say I was impressed. The name “fisher,” by the way, isn’t because of its aquatic skills, but rather comes from an old English word for polecat, “fiche” (which makes me wonder what “microfiche” really means—I’ll have to ask someone in the Lavery Library about that). A member of the mephitid family, the fisher is closely related to weasels, otters, and wolverines. While the weasel connection might not be so admirable, seeing that wolverine connection got me thinking. Why not adopt the fisher as our school’s mascot, much like the University of Michigan has adopted the wolverine? Perhaps a new X-
Men character might even be named in its honor, to help seal the deal: the Fisher-Man, scourge of the Chickenhearted.

Think about it. While it makes some sense that our school mascot is called “the cardinal,’ the reason for this is rather nebulous. It has nothing to do with the red bird in question, but rather it’s because our namesake John Fisher was made a Cardinal of the Catholic Church shortly before his death. But as I pointed out in a previous article (“St. John Fisher Was Irish”, http://www.sjfc.edu/dotAsset/4c9f3168-08f7-4fe7-8db8-9d529c29922b.pdf) this is a rather tragic honor. The Pope in Rome had named him to this august position in the hopes that King Henry VIII, who had imprisoned Fisher for disobedience, would spare him from execution. When told that a Cardinal’s hat was being sent to Fisher in the Tower of London, Henry is said to have replied: “By the time it gets here, he won’t have a head to put it on” and duly gave the orders to have Fisher beheaded. While this martyrdom may have ultimately led to Fisher’s becoming a saint, having a cardinal as our mascot seems somewhat in poor taste.

In addition, surely our sports teams would like to have a mascot that can put the fear of God into their opponents, much like the wolverine mascot does for Michigan’s opponents. No matter how much you try, making a cute little bird seem angry and intimidating just doesn’t do it. Look at the photo of a fisher accompanying this article and imagine THAT on the helmets of the St. John Fisher College football team. Their opponents might well concede defeat even before taking the field rather than have to face such a ferocious image.

Whether or not the fisher will find its way to its namesake campus remains to be seen, but here’s one more argument in favor of making it our official mascot. In addition to its ferocity, the fisher is also noted for its distinctive call, which is often described as sounding like a child
screaming. It can literally send chills down one’s spine. Don’t take my word for it—go to YouTube and experience it for yourself: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HrvdzCGjbzw

“It’s an awful sound,” says the woman who captured it for posterity. “It sounds like someone being murdered.” Truly the stuff of nightmares. Can you imagine our various teams rushing to the field emulating this “Fisher Yell” (all in the name of good sportsmanship, of course)? It puts the dreaded Rebel Yell to shame.

So let us welcome the fisher into our official family. For those of you who might demur, remember—it’s not wise to get a fisher angry.

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Tim Madigan teaches in the Department of Philosophy and Classical Studies and is the first director of the Irish Studies Program. He also serves as the Honorary Coach for the Fisher Cardinals football team every season.