

The bobcat, *Lynx rufus*, is a very secretive creature. A solitary hunter and an expert in stealth, this nocturnal cat is routinely skulking around as it evades humans or hunts its prey. With keen eyesight and excellent hearing, it will melt into its surroundings upon perceiving the slightest movement or faintest whisper indicating humans or dogs.

IS IT A BOBCAT?

Bobcat tracks can be used to indicate their whereabouts. They can be distinguished from dog (fox, coyote or pet) because the tracks of a bobcat are a little larger than a silver dollar, more rounded, with two lobes in the front of the pad and no claw marks. Being a feline, the claws of the bobcat are retractable and stay in until it is necessary to use them. Typically, the bobcat covers up its segmented scat with dirt, to remove traces of its presence from plain view. You may also find trees that have been used for claw sharpening in the bobcat's home range.

Living up to 15 years, mature bobcats measure approximately 3 feet in length, have a 6-inch black tipped tail (black on top, white underneath), stand 15 to 18 inches high, and can vary in weight from 15 to 40 pounds. The fur color varies by season. In winter it will appear gray, while in the summer it will appear to have a tawny body with more black spots. The bobcat has a unique ruff on the side of the face, and hairs protruding from the tips of the ears that serve in sensory reception.

TERRITORIES AND RANGE

Female bobcats maintain exclusive territories measuring up to 5 square miles in relation to each other. They maintain their territories¹ by scent marking using their urine, scat and secretions from anal glands. Male bobcats may establish their ranges², nearly twice as big as the territory of the female bobcat, so that they overlap that of more than 1 female bobcat. Changes in territory size due to ecological factors (food scarcity or abundance) are currently unknown.

Bobcats are most successful in areas devoid of human disturbances. Living in areas free from hunting or trapping allows the bobcat to become a successful predator in an area, and prevents them from being harvested. They base their territories upon availability of food, water, shelter and breeding opportunities. Heavy human disturbances would result in a loss of prey animals, loss or restriction to water access, limited or even destroyed den areas, and may even prevent any opportunities for breeding.

DIET

Bobcats prey on rabbits, squirrels, rats, mice, birds, insects, reptiles, amphibians and even fish on occasion. The bobcat will get close, and then within one or two bounds, will capture its prey. If it is not successful, it will move on, refusing to use any more energy than necessary to gain a meal. Their primary

food source is the rabbit, so when rabbit populations decline (which happens regularly) the bobcat populations have to alter their diet to include more of the other species mentioned above. That being said, the populations of bobcats will also be in a cycle similar to that of the rabbit. The rabbit population and the bobcat populations are in a synchronous relationship. One regulates the population of the other, and the opposite is true as well.

1. Range: the area where an animal habitually travels, while performing its usual activities.
2. Territory: any defended area.

REPRODUCTION

Bobcats breed during the winter of the year (usually before February). During this time, you may hear their snarling, hissing, and deep-throated growls floating along the evening breeze. Males can not breed their first year. The females and older male bobcats will separate immediately after mating. Nearing spring and birth, the female seeks out a den site and continues to hunt during the evening. Within 70 days the female will bear up to three fuzz ball kittens. By June, the young are eating meat. The male is not present so the female must provide for the young on her own. The young will stay with the adult female until fall, learning to survive. When fall arrives, the young leave, and the adult female will begin the mating process again. The young will generally stay together through winter, increasing their chances of survival, until they each take to their role, as a solitary hunter.

PAST, PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

When Iowa was still part of the Missouri Territory in 1817, there was a bounty of fifty cents per bobcat. In 1858 the state of Iowa issued a \$1.50 per bobcat bounty. Two years later, in 1860, the bounty dropped fifty cents, and remained \$1.00 until 1933, when the bounty was further reduced to fifty cents per bobcat. Many years later the bounty was dropped completely, but only after realizing the bobcat's importance in its niche.

In recent years there has been an increasing number of bobcat sightings. Studies of current bobcat populations in Iowa, have led to a new season for bobcat trapping/hunting. This season limits harvesting to the southern 2 rows of counties in Iowa (21 out of 99), allowing for 1 bobcat per person. The Iowa DNR set the bobcat harvesting quota at 150 animals, plus those that are harvested within 48 hours of the quota being reached – again, with the limit of one bobcat per person.

It astounds and excites me to witness the establishment of a season for harvesting bobcats in the state of Iowa. Their numbers have dwindled due to our past endeavors to eradicate the animal before realizing the role it played as a predator in its environment, and now we're trying to reestablish a manageable population.

With the establishment of the season in southern Iowa, we are learning that the bobcat's population has been growing, and has reached numbers that presently entail limited management practices. The population will continue to grow, reaching a somewhat stable point, or fluctuating with the cyclical rabbit populations, one of the bobcat's main food sources.