



EASTERN BOBCAT

Lynx rufus



Both the bobcat (*Lynx rufus*) and the Canadian lynx (*Lynx canadensis*) are loosely called **wildcats**. The bobcat is usually referred to as a **bobcat** and sometimes as a **bay lynx**, while the Canadian lynx is often simply called a **lynx**. Despite the similarity in colloquial names, these cats are different species, and their population status is different in Vermont. The bobcat is still at home in most areas of the state even though he is rarely seen. Nocturnal habits and nocturnal wariness lead many people to underestimate the numbers of bobcats we have. The Canadian lynx, on the other hand, is a creature of the 'big woods' and is not nearly as adaptable as the bobcat. The lynx is nearly extinct in Vermont. Accordingly, the Canadian lynx is now protected in Vermont and is listed on Vermont's *Endangered Species List*. For information about Vermont's *Endangered Species List*, email fwinformation@state.vt.us.

VERMONT WILDLIFE FACT SHEET

Physical Description

Bobcats are generally somewhat larger than a big housecat, averaging 15 to 20 pounds, although every year a few males in the 30 to 35 pound class are taken in Vermont. Rarely, a 'cat' will go to 40 pounds. A few have been recorded from 40 to 46 pounds in both Vermont and New Hampshire, and one old record from Jackson, New Hampshire was noted at 52 pounds.

The short *bobbed* tail, white below and black banded on top, ending in a broad band at its tip is probably responsible for the name of this cat. The *bay lynx* name for the bobcat is also quite appropriate in that *bay* means reddish-brown although the term generally suggests too dark a color for the cat. Even in summer when this cat has a noticeably redder coat, its overall appearance is relatively light, the brown being mixed with gray and yellow.

Tawny might be more descriptive. In winter, the bobcat's short dense fur is noticeably grayer. In New England, the bobcat's fur has been found to vary seasonally and also according to habitat. Bobcats in mostly mature woods tend to have darker coats.

Year round, its belly and legs are heavily spotted with black. Black streaks stand out in sharp contrast on the white of the muzzle and radiate out from its face on the long cheek fur. Black lines also occur in a symmetric pattern on top of the bobcat's head, and they usually can be seen on the sides of the body, but the latter are often quite obscure.

The bobcat's ears are distinctive. White and well-furred inside with jet black meeting the sharp white inside edge, the back of the ear is black except for a large, white, more or less triangular patch in the center. The tip of the ear may have a short

dense tuft of longer black hair on it, or this feature may be totally absent.

The feet of the bobcat are well-furred and lightly spotted. Its footprints are nearly round like those of a domestic cat. Tracks of young bobcats can easily be confused with tracks left by a roaming housecat. Adult housecat printers, however are much smaller than those left by an adult bobcat — and the bobcat's usually are substantially smaller than those left by its cousin, the Canadian lynx.

All cats have retractable claws which pivot up into recesses in the soft, padded toes for normal and very quiet traveling. The needle-sharp, curved claws are on ready call, however, and are brought into immediate action by special muscles. Claw marks sometimes show if the cat has taken off on a long leap or climbed a tree. They may also

show on a prey victim the bobcat has taken. In a fight for survival, which usually is a last resort, or when hunger forces it to take on long odds, the cat uses its sharp claws on the front feet to hold onto larger prey while the back claws severely rake its quarry. But the kill usually results from a well-placed bite from the bobcat's sharp canine teeth.



Life Cycle

Mating usually occurs in late March or early April. After mating, the male and female separate, apparently until the next breeding period. Household chores are left to mother, who takes her time selecting a den site. Since bobcats are resourceful, intelligent animals, they are found all across the country and evidently adapt to widely varying surroundings. Abandoned logging buildings in the east and those in ghost towns of the west supply some den sites for these wildcats. They not only find protection and shelter for their young family in such places, but they also find an adequate supply of rats and mice that figure largely in their diet.

In Vermont, however, most dens are found in crevices of abundant ledges, and occasionally under turned-over stumps or logs of a blowdown. The den is simply a dry, protected space large enough to accommodate the female with her kittens for the limited time they will use it.

Gestation is about 60 days, bringing the birth of the well-spotted kittens generally into late May or early June. Three kittens is a good average in New England. They arrive such like house cats, well-furred and eyes sealed. Eyes open in about a week to ten days. For the first two weeks, they are content to stay huddled together. At feeding time, they mew and crawl over each other in the manner of pet kittens the same when searching for the milk supply. Once satisfied, they sleep most of the time. Their activity soon increases, and at three weeks they are playing vigorously in the den, but sleep still occupies much of their time.

The coat they wear at birth lasts only about two months, and then they begin to look like miniature adults. They are usually weaned at this time and may venture outside the den. Curiosity is inborn, and they play and investigate everything near the den. By midsummer, the kittens travel on short trips with their mother. They venture further from the den on their own as well and may begin *camping* in new temporary dens as they accompany mother on training sessions.

The bobcat kitten, like all wild animals, has a lot to learn from the parent in order to become proficient enough at survival to become an adult. Being alert is instinctive. Making sure of instincts is generally taught or learned from mistakes. The training appears to be done solely by the mother. It is uncommon to find tracks in the snow as late as January which show a female still

traveling with a kitten or two from the previous spring. Tracks of two or more bobcats traveling together are invariably made by a family group. Adult bobcats are not social animals, and do not tolerate the attention of the opposite sex except during the breeding season. But when mating time does come, last year's kittens are on their own in the big world. Then they must find their own territory. The old home range is reserved by the female for her new family as long as it fulfills her needs.

Food

Mice, rats, squirrels, snowshoe hare, cottontail rabbits, birds, carrion, and occasionally deer constitute the bobcat's diet. They are opportunists and will take almost any small animal when the opportunity presents itself.

Habits

The otter gets credit for being the funster in the wild. And there isn't much argument on the score since they are born teasers, make their own *playground* slides, and seem to really enjoy life beyond survival. Perhaps the bobcat rates second in this regard. If you don't think so, follow a bobcat track without dogs on a winter snow just to see what he does and where he goes. He doesn't avoid water nearly as much as most people think. He will wade in shallow water and even choose to swim point-to-point across quiet water. Adept at tree climbing, a bobcat will climb a tree to take a nap in the shade on a large limb. Trees also provide a means of escape, and sometimes prove the

animal's undoing as it 'trees' before hunting hounds.

It is common when tracking a 'cat' to find that it goes out of its way to walk a horizontal pole or log well off the ground, like a youngster walking a picket fence. When it has met the challenge, it often returns to the earlier line of travel.

Bobcats seem to jump or given short chase to nearly any moving thing in close range, whether for food or fun. Like house cats, they are stalkers and sitters when hunting. It is not their nature to give active chase for more than a short distance.

Eyes and ears are the greatest safeguards and best hunting assets bobcats have. The cats poke and smell under logs to disrupt chipmunks, mice, or other prey that might be hiding under them, but following a scent trail is not in this animal's bag of tricks.

Hair-raising tales of the ferocity of bobcats are largely untrue. Most 'cat' hunters will tell you that bobcats put up a big bluff. Often the 'cats' trust the bluff too much.

History

The bobcat is a native Vermont animal. He was here when the first settlers arrived. Zadock Thompson, a Vermont naturalist, said in his 1853 edition of *Natural History of Vermont* that by then the bobcat was "...very rare, being only occasionally seen, in the most unsettled parts of the state." This would coincide with the decline of forest land in Vermont. By the 1870s, Vermont was only 30

percent covered by forest. That didn't leave much habitat for the bobcats. Now Vermont is 75 percent forest covered. Abandoned farmland has been taken over again by trees, but even now when compared to some of our other wildlife, bobcats are not 'plentiful' anywhere. They never were and they never will be because of being at the top of the food chain.

Current Management

The bobcat always had the reputation of being a bad guy, and he was persecuted because of it. In recent Vermont history, a ten dollar bounty was paid for the killing of a bobcat. It lasted until 1972 when it was repealed.