



Comeback CATS

Seldom seen bobcats now live
throughout Kentucky **By Laura Patton**

THE BOBCAT – SOMETIMES referred to as a wildcat – is an elusive carnivore that is widespread across North America. It is abundant in many states, which is often surprising to people who have never seen one. Once rare and at risk of disappearing in some regions, the bobcat (*Lynx rufus*) has made a remarkable comeback: its population continues to expand and increase throughout its native range.

As with many wildlife species, bobcats experienced drastic population declines as a result of habitat destruction and unregulated harvest from the 1600s to the early 1900s.

Early European settlers, awed by the plentiful wildlife resources they discovered in America, perceived an unlimited supply of game. This myth of superabundance – in conjunction with the establishment of game as a source of revenue – led to relentless exploitation of native wildlife.

Bobcats lost large expanses of habitat as

people cleared the forests to make way for farms and settlement. Bounties, now proven to be ineffective, were established for predatory bobcats, coyotes, foxes and wolves in an effort to protect livestock. Bobcats grew scarce in Kentucky.

Fortunately, conservationists such as Aldo Leopold and Theodore Roosevelt recognized the serious state of declining animal populations; they began a movement to conserve wildlife and establish sustainable wildlife management practices.

“Optimism is a good characteristic, but if carried to an excess, it becomes foolishness,” Roosevelt said. “We are prone to speak of the resources of this country as inexhaustible; this is not so.”

Bobcats were still considered rare in Kentucky as late as 1974. They had nearly disappeared from the Corn Belt states of the Midwest as well. Today, thanks to wise use practices, laws regulating harvest and the



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COYOTES vs. BOBCATS

Do coyotes compete with bobcats for food or territory? Research hasn't provided a definitive answer:

- A comparison of harvest levels in Maine showed a simultaneous decline in bobcat harvest as coyote harvest increases.
- An experimental reduction of coyotes in Texas resulted in an increase in bobcat density.
- Other studies have reported no evidence of competition for territories or food as the percentages of particular prey items differ between bobcat and coyote diets; food is likely abundant enough that competition isn't an issue.
- A study in Florida reported that both species consumed some of the same prey items. However, when the prey consisted of mammals, coyotes consumed mainly animals with hooves while bobcats focused on rodents and rabbits. Coyotes also seasonally consume large quantities of fruits; bobcats are strictly meat eaters.

bobcat's persistent and adaptive nature, this cat has made an impressive comeback. Now the bobcat is the most abundant and widely distributed felid of any in North America. Bobcats occur in every state except for Delaware. They are also found in parts of Canada and Mexico. Recent assessments place the bobcat population in the United States at 2.4 million to 3.6 million.

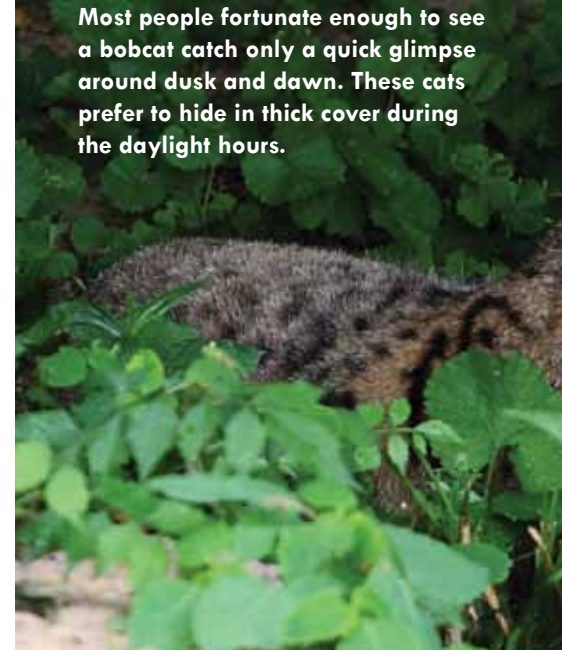
However, few people realize bobcats occur in Kentucky. Others believe these cats are rare. In reality, bobcats occur statewide. Harvest records reveal bobcats are abundant throughout most of Kentucky. They're most concentrated in the eastern, western and south-central portions of the state.

THE SECRETIVE SPECIES

Why don't more people see bobcats? It's because bobcats are an elusive species. They are shy, secretive and seldom seen during the day. Bobcats are crepuscular in activity patterns, meaning they are most active around sunrise and sunset. At other times they rest in rock crevices, brush piles, uprooted trees or hollow logs. They may have multiple dens throughout their home ranges.

If you learn the habits of bobcats, then you may be able to catch a quick glimpse of one. Look for a bobcat if you're driving along forest roads at first light. You may only see its hind end as it leaps from sight, but look for legs relatively long to its body size and a bobbed tail.

You may also flush a bobcat from thick grasses or vegetation as you walk along a road or trail. If you are lucky, the bobcat will turn and look at you for a



Most people fortunate enough to see a bobcat catch only a quick glimpse around dusk and dawn. These cats prefer to hide in thick cover during the daylight hours.

fleeting second with its large eyes. It may flare the ruff of hair around its face as a sign of aggression before it leaps away.

The bobcat's ears are tufted with black hair. The back of its ears has a characteristic white spot centered on black fur. Its coat is grayish to reddish brown with black spots or streaks. Its belly is bright white with striking black spots. Its six-inch tail is short compared to its overall body length of two to three feet. A large male bobcat may weigh 25 pounds.

EVIDENCE OF RESIDENCE

The best way to tell if there are bobcats in the area is to look for evidence of their sign in bottomland forests, swamps, rocky cliffs, brushy field edges and grasslands adjacent to forests. Look for tracks in the mud or dust along an old logging or mining road. Creek beds are also good places to search. A bobcat track looks similar to a house cat's track, but it is larger – it measures around 1½ inches long and 1¾ inches wide.

There are several differences between a track left by a bobcat and one made by a coyote. The overall shape of a bobcat track is round; a coyote's track is oval-shaped. Coyote tracks show claw marks; bobcat tracks do not. Bobcat tracks have two lobes

Coyote tracks (left) show claw marks, while bobcat tracks do not. A bobcat track measures approximately 1½ inches long by 1¾ inches wide.



COYOTE



BOBCAT

RICK HILL ILLUSTRATION



DAVE BAKER PHOTO

on the front of the heel pad and three lobes on the back. Coyote tracks have one on the front and two on the back.

Bobcats commonly deposit their scat on elevated rocks or logs. Bobcat droppings have a large proportion of hair and bones.

You might also find a cache, or a carcass that a bobcat has covered with leaves, grass, or pine needles for a later meal. Bobcats eat mice, rats, rabbits, muskrats, opossum, birds, insects, reptiles, deer and beaver. In northern latitudes, they eat snowshoe hare and porcupines. Bobcats rarely attack adult sheep, goats or calves. They occasionally take lambs or raid chicken houses, although these reports are uncommon.

Bobcats stalk or ambush their prey. A stalking bobcat is so stealthy that it may take several minutes to move a few feet. Once ready to pounce, the bobcat moves with a sudden burst of speed. Bobcats are also agile tree climbers and good swimmers.

BOBCAT TERRITORIES

The size of a bobcat's home range varies with its gender, the quality of habitat, food availability and the season of the year. Home ranges are generally larger where habitat is fragmented. Bobcats in northern latitudes generally roam further than in the south because prey may be less abundant. Bobcats in the north are also typically larger and require more food.

Home ranges of male bobcats are generally twice those of the females; home ranges of males may overlap with multiple females

and other males. Overlap in territories between sexes depends on climate, density and prey abundance.

Male and female bobcats mark the boundaries of their territories with feces, urine, gland secretions and tree scratching as warnings to other bobcats of the same sex. Some studies have documented a smaller area within the home range – called the core area – that does not overlap with other cats. Individual use of this core area may reduce competition for food, dens and breeding area used by males.

Bobcats are solitary except for when they mate or when females are raising their kittens. During the breeding season, bobcats vocalize to attract mates. Bobcats are polygynous, meaning that males mate with more than one female. This is why the range of a male bobcat overlaps with several female territories.

Bobcats generally breed from January through March, giving birth 62 days after mating. While a litter averages two kittens, the number of kittens born to a mother may range from one to six. Kittens are born in nests of leaves or grasses within a brush pile or rock crevice. They emerge from the den when they are about a month old and stay with their mother until the next breeding season. Kittens and young bobcats are vulnerable to a variety of predators including hawks, owls, foxes, domestic dogs and coyotes.

BOBCAT RESEARCH

Because of their elusive nature, information about bobcats is challenging to ob-

tain. State agencies monitor bobcats and their populations through archer surveys, harvest data, camera surveys and snares that collect hair for DNA analysis.

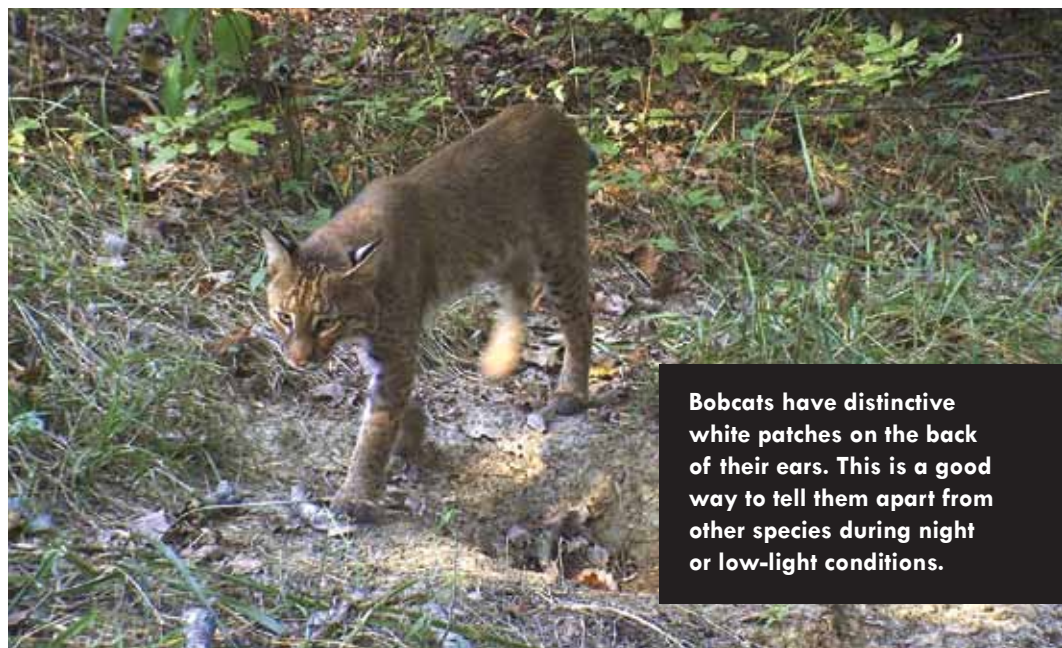
These cats are curious, which makes it easier for wildlife researchers or fur trappers to capture them. Bobcats patrolling the boundaries of their territories are attracted from a distance by shiny pie tins, feathers or flagging tape waving in the wind. A chunk of beaver meat at the trap is often irresistible bait.

Researchers can examine teeth of harvested animals to study age structure. By examining a female bobcat's reproductive tract, biologists can determine its previous litter size.

A relatively new method being tested by wildlife researchers is the use of scat detection dogs. These specially-trained dogs can identify scat of specific species such as bobcat. Collected scat is genetically analyzed to determine the number of different individuals within an area.

Ongoing research shows that bobcat numbers are stable or increasing throughout their range. Careful wildlife management has created opportunities for strictly regulated hunting and trapping seasons on bobcats.

Leopold wrote that conservation is a state of harmony between people and the land. "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community," he noted. "It is wrong when it tends otherwise." ■



Bobcats have distinctive white patches on the back of their ears. This is a good way to tell them apart from other species during night or low-light conditions.

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