

8/26/81



Natural History Notes



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THE BOBCAT

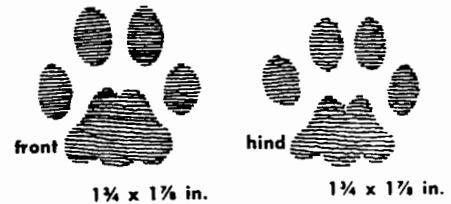


Bobcat or Wildcat

The bobcat, a resident of the forests of Wisconsin, is rarely seen by man. A key reason for this is that like most cats, it is nocturnal. Most of its day is spent resting in well hidden locations. The bobcat is the smallest of the North American "wildcats." It weighs from 15 to 25 pounds and rarely exceeds 40 pounds. The average adult is about three feet long and 15 to 18 inches high. The female is typically about 25% smaller than the male.

Bobcats occur throughout much of North America from coast to coast and from southern Canada to Mexico. It inhabits swamps like the Everglades and mountainous country. Enough food and sufficient hiding places are very important. They require land and will not thrive in areas developed by man. When compared to its southern relatives, bobcats in the north are larger, darker and have denser fur. Northern bobcats are more valuable to the fur trade.

Up until recently, the bobcat's economic value was very low. Their fur was considered inferior and had little value. Many trappers did not bother to skin bobcats; they killed for the bounty. But as the skin of the other larger cats became unavailable due to regulations, the value of the bobcat pelt, referred to as the lynx cat by the fur industry, began to rise. In the 1930's a bobcat pelt may have sold for as little as 25 cents, by 1967 it sold for ten dollars, and may bring up to 400 dollars today. The pelt probably has more value as a display item than as material for a garment.



The bobcat is often confused with its northern relative, the Canada lynx. The range of these two cats overlap in the north. The lynx is generally larger with longer ear tufts. The most distinct difference is the tail. The lynx's tail has an all-black tip. In contrast, the bobcat's tail has a black bar on its upper surface but has a white tip.

Bobcats are solitary animals, very territorial and very sparsely spread throughout their range. A female's territory rarely overlaps with that of another female. The territory of males may overlap but it is usually twice as widespread as the females'. Territorial boundaries are marked with feces, urine and a secretion from the anal gland. Bobcats rarely come into contact with each other for purposes other than reproduction.

Being a predator, bobcats are excellent hunters and very fierce fighters. Their prime food is rabbits and bobcat numbers often fluctuate as the rabbit populations go up and down. They are opportunists, like most animals, and will eat most animals they can catch, even snakes and some insects.

Bobcats mate in mid-winter and up to four young are born about 65 days later. The female makes her nest in an old stump, hollow log or brush pile. The kits' eyes remain closed for nine days after birth. They are weaned in about two months when they begin to go on a meat diet. The young remain with the mother until they learn hunting and survival techniques. The survival rate of the young appears to be dependent upon the numbers of rabbits available for food. The females breed their first year of life and the cycle of nature goes on.

In spite of bounties and other efforts to eradicate most predators in years past, the bobcat has survived. It is among the easiest animals to trap, yet it has maintained its numbers and continues to survive. The bobcat's prime enemy is probably man's development of wild lands. Just because you don't see a bobcat doesn't mean they are not around.