

Bobcat, *Felis rufus*

Status:

State: Endangered

Federal: Not listed

Identification

Taxonomically, bobcats belong to the order Carnivora, or carnivores, meaning that they are primarily flesh-eaters. They are members of the Felidae family and are commonly known as felines. All members of this family look somewhat similar in appearance. Bobcats have retractable claws and five digits on each foot. Their pelt color varies throughout different parts of their range within the continental United States. In this part of the country, bobcats generally have a tawny to grayish-brown fur



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with spots and streaks and a whitish-colored underside that is also spotted and streaked. The fur around their lips, chin and underside of the neck are also light-colored. Bobcats have ruffs of fur on both sides of their face and small tufts on the ears. The top of their short tails is tipped black.

Like all other felines, bobcats have vertically shaped pupils that widen to maximize light reception for nocturnal activity. In addition, they have relatively long legs in relation to their bodies, with the hind legs being longer than the front. This posture accentuates the bobbed tail, which ranges in length from 5-7 in. A mature bobcat is approximately 35 in. in length and 20 in. high at the shoulders. Their weight ranges from about 15-25 lbs. for adult females and 20-35 lbs. for adult males. However, large males can weigh up to 40 lbs.

Habitat

Bobcats are extremely adaptable animals that can survive in a variety of habitats. In our western states they are found in deserts and mountains. In the South they inhabit swamps, river bottoms and forests. In the Northeast they can be found in forests, areas of mixed forest and agriculture and even rural areas near cities and small towns. In general, bobcats use rough, broken habitat that has a mix of early and late successional stages. They do not prosper in highly suburbanized areas or in areas that have been severely altered by intense agriculture. This explains their absence from many Midwest states. However, bobcats can survive in agricultural areas that are interspersed with natural cover if they support adequate prey populations (Godin 1977 and McCord 1977).

Bobcats prefer habitats that provide dense cover in the form of understory vines, briars, shrubs, and saplings (Leopold et al 1995). These cover types provide areas for resting, and protection from both weather and predators (Leopold et al 1995 and Godin

1977). In northern New Jersey, typical bobcat habitat consists of large areas of contiguous forest and fragmented forests interspersed with agricultural areas or early succession vegetation. Bobcats often use areas with rock outcrops, caves, and ledges that provide shelter and cover for hunting, resting and rearing young. Where rocky areas are not available, swamps, bogs, conifer stands and rhododendron and mountain laurel thickets provide good cover and excellent hunting grounds (New Jersey Division of Fish, Game and Wildlife 1995). In southern New Jersey, dense thickets of briars and conifers serve as resting and escape cover (New Jersey Division of Fish, Game and Wildlife 1995). Clearly, bobcats are extremely versatile creatures that have the ability to adapt to a wide variety of habitat types and prey species.

Status and Conservation

The bobcat has been extirpated from much of the Midwest due to habitat changes resulting from modern agricultural practices. It is considered endangered in Iowa, Indiana and Ohio. However, Illinois removed the bobcat from its threatened list in 1999 and Pennsylvania, which had permitted no legal hunting between 1970 and 1999, reinstated a limited hunting and trapping season beginning in 2000.

In New Jersey, the bobcat population experienced severe declines near the turn of the 19th century as most forests were cleared for lumber, fuel, charcoal and agricultural use. As the remaining habitat became highly fragmented, bobcat numbers plummeted. During the 1950s and 1960s, reports of bobcat sightings and killings persisted, but by the early 1970s it was thought that the feline had been extirpated from the Garden State. The bobcat gained full legal protection under New Jersey regulations in 1972 when it was classified as a game species with a closed season (Lund 1979).

In 1977, the New Jersey Division of Fish, Game and Wildlife initiated a project to restore the species to suitable habitat within the state. Between 1978 and 1982, 24 bobcats were captured in Maine and released in northern New Jersey (James Sciascia, pers. comm. 1997). In the years that followed, reports of bobcat sightings increased, suggesting that the project had been a success. In 1991 the status of the bobcat was changed again to endangered under New Jersey's Endangered and Nongame Species Conservation Act.

The New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife's Endangered and Nongame Species Program (ENSP) conducted a scent post survey in 1995 and confirmed bobcat presence in Sussex, Warren, Morris, and Passaic counties. In addition, reliable bobcat sightings have been reported from Mercer, Somerset, Bergen, Burlington, Ocean, Atlantic, Cape May, Cumberland, and Salem counties (Sciascia, pers. comm. 1997).

In 1996, the ENSP began a pilot project using radio telemetry to monitor the movements of bobcats in northern New Jersey. The objective was to determine the bobcats' home range and habitat preferences in that part of the state. The work is continuing, although technological advances now allow biologists to fit bobcats with satellite transmitters. Bobcat locations can now be monitored on a continual basis using satellites.