## WILDLIFE IN CONNECTICUT

## **INFORMATIONAL SERIES**

## **BOBCAT**

Lynx rufus



**Habitat**: Mixed deciduous-coniferous and hardwood forests; rock ledges; preference for brushy and rocky woodlands broken by fields, old roads and farmland.

**Weight:** Adult males: 14-40 pounds; adult females: 10-33 pounds.

**Length:** Adult males: 32-37 inches; adult females: 28-32 inches.

**Food:** Cottontail rabbits, woodchucks, squirrels, chipmunks, mice, voles, snowshoe hares, deer, birds, and, to a much lesser extent, insects and reptiles; bobcats also prey upon domestic animals such as poultry, small pigs, sheep, goats and housecats.

**Identification:** The bobcat is a stout-bodied, medium-sized feline, with a short, "bobbed" tail (six to six-and-a half inches), a prominent face ruff and tufts of black hair on its pointed ears. The sides and flanks are usually yellowish-brown or reddish-brown with distinct or faint black spots. The underparts are white. The back is often tawny-colored with a dark middorsal line. The tail may have one to several indistinct dark bands and a tip that is black on top and whitish below.

Bobcats are about twice the size of their distant relative, the housecat, and the tracks of a young bobcat can easily be confused with those left by a roaming housecat. Adult housecat prints, however, are much smaller than adult bobcat prints. Bobcat tracks have an overall round appearance with four round toe pads in both front and rear prints. There is a fifth toe on the forefoot; however, it does not leave an impression because it is raised high on the foot. The claws do not

leave an impression either because they are usually retracted.

Range: The bobcat's range has historically extended throughout the lower 48 United States into southern Canada and south to central Mexico. This range has remained largely intact due to the species' adaptability to various habitats and human pressures. However, the bobcat has been extirpated from some areas along the mid-Atlantic coast due to dense human population and development. Bobcats are also no longer found in those portions of the Midwestern states where intense agriculture has decreased suitable habitat. Currently, limited populations exist throughout Connecticut, with the heaviest concentrations occurring in the northwestern corner. Territorial and home ranges in the Northeast vary from eight to 20 square miles in size. Females tend to have smaller and more exclusive ranges than males. Daily movements of one to four miles are common.

Reproduction: Bobcats are polygamous (have more than one mate) and do not form lasting pair bonds. They breed between January and May. Females may breed before they are one year old but generally do not produce a litter until they are two years old. Dens are located in caves, rock crevices, hollow logs and trees, or beneath windfall. The den may be lined with dry leaves, moss or grass, which is formed into a shallow depression by the female. The same den site may be used for several years in a row. Rock ledges and outcrops are often used as daytime retreats and natal dens.

After a gestation period of about 62 days, kittens are born, with an average of two to three per litter. Kitten survival is a major factor in annual bobcat population fluctuations; survival is linked to food abundance. When food is plentiful, many young survive; a scarcity of food results in heavy mortality to kittens. Kittens weigh 10 to 12 ounces at birth. They are born blind and their eyes remain closed for three to 11 days. Kittens nurse for about 60 days and remain with the female until the following spring. Males do not participate in raising the young. At about four weeks of age, kittens begin to leave the den and take solid food provided by the female. Juvenile bobcats leave the female's territory before she gives birth to a litter the following year.

Interesting Facts: Bobcats are most active just after dusk and before dawn. They are secretive, solitary and seldom observed, tending to hunt and travel in areas of thick cover. Bobcats rely on their keen eyesight and hearing for locating enemies and prey. They are very patient and ambush their prey. Their sense of smell is not acute.

Bobcats specialize on medium-sized prey such as rabbits and hares. Although white-tailed deer is reported in diets of bobcats in the Northeast, there is evidence that bobcats probably kill very few deer unless other

foods become scarce. When bobcats do take deer, they are most likely to kill sick, injured, young or very old animals.

Bobcats may cache, or cover, their kills with leaves, grass, snow and even hair from the carcass. Other feline species are known to cache their kills for future consumption.

History in Connecticut: The status of bobcats has changed dramatically in Connecticut. Historically, they were not protected and were viewed as a threat to agriculture and more desirable game species. In addition, the dramatic deforestation that peaked in the 1800s greatly reduced the habitat available to bobcats and many other wildlife species. Bobcats do not prefer mature forest but do flourish in areas with thick understory. In the 1970s, a large increase in the value of bobcat pelts raised concerns that they could be overharvested. At that time, the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection reclassified the bobcat as a protected furbearer, with no hunting or trapping seasons. Conversely, housing and commercial development have decreased the amount of suitable habitat. Bobcats are less adaptable to humans than other wildlife species, such as the coyote.

Management of Nuisances: Compared to many wildlife species, bobcats rarely cause conflicts with human activities. Infrequently, they kill livestock, especially fowl, and attack domestic cats. Problems caused by bobcats are too infrequent to justify efforts to reduce populations. Conflicts should be addressed on an individual basis and can often be remedied by preventative methods such as fencing.

Bobcat attacks on people are virtually unknown. They are not a significant vector of disease and rarely contract the mid-Atlantic strain of rabies.



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