



**MEET
THE**

BOBCAT

— *New plan guides future management*

By Lance Durfey and Andrew MacDuff
photos by Angie Berchielli unless otherwise noted

Dusk on a cold November evening. A light snow is falling, and a young varying hare—only partially transitioned to his all-white winter coat—is dining on some maple twigs a few yards from a dense stand of hemlock. He shuffles slowly from one twig to another, nibbling as he goes. It is the hare's first fall, having recently dispersed from its mother and two littermates in October. As the hare shifts his position to reach another bud, he turns his back to a small boulder. A fatal mistake. From 10 feet away, a bobcat, unseen behind the rock, leaps onto the hare...

Bobcats are champions of stealth. They are secretive, solitary cats that can move quietly about their environment, often in search of a meal. In fact, despite an estimated one to two million bobcats across North America, few of us will ever see one in the wild. Those lucky people who do spot one are often struck by the similarity of the animal's appearance to a house cat.





Bobcats eat a variety of prey, from mice to deer, and will also feed on carrion.

Bobcats get their name from their stubby, “bobbed” tails. With short, dense, soft coats, whiskered faces, a ruff of longer fur around the face, and black-tufted ears, they are nearly unmistakable. Occasionally, people confuse a bobcat for a Canada lynx, but lynx are considered extirpated in New York. Bobcats are about twice the size of a house cat, and have obvious black bars on their forelegs. Their coats vary from beige to reddish-brown to gray, with spots that are distinctive in some individuals and faded in others. Found farther north, lynx are taller, generally lighter in color, and the tips of their tails are black all the way around, while the tips of bobcats’ tails are black only on the top.

Historically there were only three major bobcat population centers in New York, namely the Adirondacks, Catskills and Taconics. Recent observations by hunters, trappers, and the general public suggest that bobcat populations are expanding. This is not unique to New York; most northeastern states report increasing bobcat populations. With the exception of Long Island, bobcats are currently found in suitable habitat throughout the state. While they can be found in a variety of habitats, including shrubby fields, wooded

farmland, and timbered swamps, they prefer coniferous, mixed, and hardwood forests with rocky ledges or hollow logs for denning.

Bobcats are most active at dawn and dusk, but can be seen at any time of day. Rabbits, hares and white-tailed deer are their preferred prey, with deer being particularly important during the winter, as a single kill can provide food for weeks. Bobcats usually kill winter-weakened fawns (deer born the previous spring),

but they can take healthy fawns, yearlings and even adults on rare occasion. Opportunistic carnivores, they will also eat small mammals like mice, voles, shrews and chipmunks, as well as birds, squirrels, muskrat, beaver, woodchuck and opossum.

Although bobcats can climb trees, they do the majority of their hunting on the ground. They rely on stealth and surprise to capture prey, using available cover to get close to attack, or sitting quietly and ambushing prey that passes by. Because of their smaller size and lack of speed in deep snow, bobcats are poorly adapted for preying on moving deer; most kills are of deer that are bedded down.

The amount of prey available in an area helps determine the population density and home range size of bobcats. In areas of good habitat with abundant prey, they will have smaller home ranges because the area can support more cats. In areas of poor habitat with low prey numbers, the reverse is true. The average home range of a bobcat in North America is highly variable, but averages about 15 square miles for males, and only 6 square miles for females.



C. Miller

In keeping with their solitary nature, adult bobcats typically do not use the same areas at the same time, except during the breeding season. To let other cats know an area is occupied, they mark their territory with droppings, urine and scrapes (scratching the ground with their hind feet after scent-marking an area).

Bobcats breed in February or March. Females can reproduce in their first year, while males typically breed in their second. Dens are located under fallen

trees, inside hollow logs or trees, rocky crevices, thickets, shallow caves, rock piles and sometimes in abandoned or little-used barns and out-buildings. A single male may mate with multiple females; males do not aid in raising the young.

Following a gestation period of 60-70 days, females give birth in April or May to a litter of one to four, 12-ounce kittens. The newborn kittens are blind and covered with spotted fur. The eyes open at 8-10 days, and the young nurse for 60

days. After they are weaned, the young eat prey brought to them by the females; sometimes the prey is alive, allowing the young to practice their hunting skills. At three- to five-months old, the kittens start accompanying their mother on nightly hunts until autumn or winter when the young disperse.

For years, bobcats were viewed as “varmints” and destructive predators. Many northern New York counties paid bounties on the cats until 1971 when the New York State Legislature passed a law prohibiting this practice. It wasn’t until 1976 that bobcats were given protected status in the state. At that time, the state legislature granted DEC authority to establish hunting and trapping seasons. In 1977, DEC closed a large portion of the state to bobcat harvest and started a pelt-tagging system to track the numbers harvested by hunters and trappers during the open seasons. Since that time, there has been a steady increase in the bobcat population (as indicated by increased sightings and harvest).

DEC biologists have continued to monitor the state’s bobcat populations, and recently completed a statewide management plan for these cats (see sidebar). Among the plan’s recommendations are several changes in harvest regulations—a reflection of the increased number of these felines.

Harvest and observation data provided by hunters and trappers are key in assessing the status of the state’s bobcat populations. Likewise, sightings from hikers, farmers, trailcam users, and others who spend time outdoors also provide important information that helps biologists get a clear picture of bobcat population trends and range expansion. Members of the public who spot a bobcat are encouraged to report the sighting by filling out a Furbearer Sighting Survey (available online at www.dec.ny.gov/animals/30770.html).



Even young bobcats are good climbers.



Monitoring the state's bobcat population, including receiving valuable observation data from the public, will assure a healthy population in the future. After all, it's not only hunters, trappers and photographers who value bobcats; most New Yorkers like to know that our only native wild cat thrives in the Empire State—a seldom seen indicator of a healthy ecosystem.

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Bobcat Management

New York biologists have been studying bobcats for many years. Recently, DEC adopted a bobcat management plan (2012-2017). The plan focuses on two objectives: 1) maintaining or increasing bobcat populations in all areas of the state where suitable habitat exists; and 2) providing for the use and enjoyment of bobcats in a sustainable manner by the public.

As part of the plan, DEC implemented several changes in bobcat harvest regulations, including extending the trapping season in northern New York to match the existing hunting season, and establishing a new, limited (3-4 week) trapping and hunting season in portions of central and western New York. This is expected to produce only a small bobcat harvest, allowing for continued population growth. In areas newly opened to trapping and hunting, trappers and hunters will be required to obtain a free permit to participate, and to both log their take and effort, and provide biological samples from all harvested bobcats. Log books will also be offered to hunters and trappers in existing harvest areas on a voluntary basis.

The new plan will enable DEC to obtain better data, making it easier to monitor bobcat populations. DEC will track harvest trends closely and make sure that harvest seasons are appropriate for a given area. DEC's goal is to manage bobcats sustainably so that the state's bobcat populations continue to exist for the enjoyment of all.

To view DEC's *Management Plan for Bobcats in New York State, 2012-2017*, visit www.dec.ny.gov/docs/wildlife_pdf/finalbmp2012.pdf.