

Wild Things in Your Woodlands

Bobcat



The bobcat (*Lynx rufus*), a small wild cat, can be found across much of New York State, except on Long Island and parts of central and western New York. About twice the size of the domestic cat, adult males weigh about 28 pounds and are 22 inches high at the shoulder. Females are usually much smaller in size, reaching an average of 20 pounds.

Bobcats are tawny to grey in color, with black spots, and very soft, dense, short fur. They have a stout body, pointed ears, and short, “bobbed” tails that are black-spotted with a white-tip.

The bobcat is an elusive and solitary creature, and catching a glimpse or seeing signs of this animal is a rare treat. They are mainly nocturnal, but sometimes venture out in the daytime. When visiting suitable habitat in the winter, you may be able to find bobcat tracks in the snow. Follow the tracks to experience life from a bobcat’s point of view, walking from vantage point to vantage point in search of food. You may walk across a log to cross a stream, climb to the top of a rock formation, or stop and visit a brush pile. Be prepared – these cats are excellent climbers and strong swimmers!

Bobcats are efficient, wary predators equipped with sharp senses of sight, smell and hearing. They have four large canine teeth to pierce deeply into prey and retractable, hooked claws on both the front and hind feet. Bobcats are opportunistic and will prey on anything that is available. Small animals such as mice, voles, shrews, squirrels, chipmunks, birds, rabbits and hares, form the bulk of the bobcat's diet. They will also feed on porcupines, minks, muskrats, skunks, fish, frogs, and insects. Bobcats will even occasionally take sick, weak, or crippled deer, and will store carcasses for later use by covering them with leaves.

The bobcat primarily inhabits extensive forests, wooded swamps, rocky outcrops, and occasionally agricultural areas. The most critical features of bobcat habitat are places for refuge and protection, such as rocky ledges. Bobcat often use rocky ledges and rock piles

for shelter, breeding, and raising young. Brush piles, hollow trees, and logs also provide good cover for resting and dens. Bobcats are not present in heavily developed areas. However, they can use patches of wooded habitat.

Bobcats breed from late February to early March, and young are born in April or May following a 50- to 60-day gestation period. Bobcats give birth in dens--rock crevices, caves and hollow logs insulated with dry leaves and mosses. Average litter size is two kittens, but can range from one to five. Kittens stay with their mothers for several months, learning to hunt and kill prey.

Foxes, owls, and adult male bobcats may kill bobcat kittens. However, the most common cause of mortality for kittens and juveniles is starvation due to low food supply. During severe winters, adult bobcats may die of starvation too. In addition, adults may be injured or killed by their prey. Several diseases carried by raccoons and feral cats including rabies, feline distemper, and feline leukemia may infect adults. Bobcats may live up to 14 years in the wild.

Bobcats will be attracted to areas where they can find suitable shelter and food. Habitat features that attract and benefit small mammals – like clearcuts, brush piles, and large logs left on the forest floor – will in turn enhance habitat for bobcats. Hollow logs will also be used as dens, and bobcats often prefer to walk across logs in the winter rather than forge through deep snow. You can take further steps to benefit bobcats by protecting rocky outcrops and crevices from disturbance, and providing good hunting habitat nearby.

The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation would like to learn more about the occurrence and distribution of bobcats in New York, particularly in areas where hunting and trapping of bobcat is not permitted, including most of Central and Western New York. In these areas, landowners like you, who spend a considerable amount of time outdoors, can be an essential resource for information on bobcats. If you have information, and would like to report a bobcat sighting, visit the NYSDEC web site at <http://www.dec.ny.gov/public/30770.html>

Kristi Sullivan coordinates the Conservation Education Program at Cornell's Arnot Forest. More information on managing habitat for wildlife, as well as upcoming educational programs at the Arnot Forest can be found by visiting the Arnot Conservation Education Program web site at arnotconservation.info

Bobcat photo courtesy of
David Westphalen/Painet Inc.