

Living with Wildlife

Bobcats

Found throughout all of Washington, bobcats (*Lynx rufus*) are probably more common than most people realize. Bobcats appear to be using urban and suburban settings more often, although they are still not often seen due to their reclusive ways.

Adult male bobcats weigh 20 to 30 pounds and average 3 feet in length (Fig. 1). Females are considerably smaller and may weigh less than a large house cat.

Bobcats can be various shades of buff and brown, with dark brown or black stripes and spots on some parts of the body. The tip of the tail and the backs of the ears are black. They have short ear tufts, and ruffs of hair on the side of the head, giving the appearance of sideburns. Bobcats of eastern Washington tend to be a much lighter buff color than those of western Washington.

Both color phases occur along the eastern side of the Cascade Mountains.

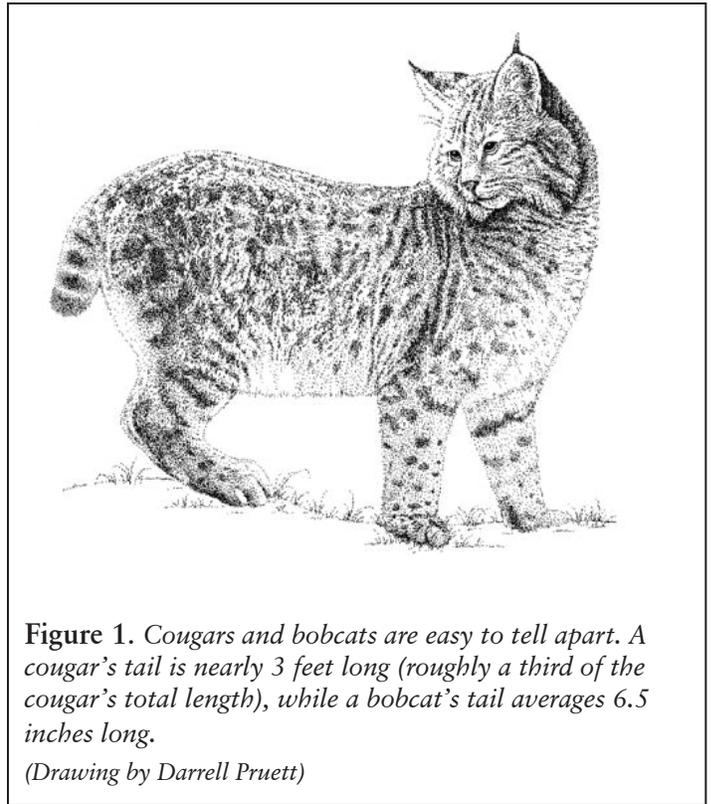


Figure 1. Cougars and bobcats are easy to tell apart. A cougar's tail is nearly 3 feet long (roughly a third of the cougar's total length), while a bobcat's tail averages 6.5 inches long.

(Drawing by Darrell Pruett)

Facts about Bobcats

Habitat and Home Range

- Rock cliffs, outcroppings, and ledges are important to bobcats for shelter, raising young, and resting sites. Large brush or log piles and hollow trees or logs are used in wooded areas.
- Finding bobcats in open fields, meadows and agricultural areas is not uncommon, provided enough brushy or timbered areas for escape cover is nearby.
- Bobcats occur less frequently in areas of deep winter snow. Unlike lynx (Fig. 4), bobcats have relatively small feet and snow greatly reduces their mobility and ability to catch prey.
- Home range size of bobcats in western Washington varies from 2.5 to six square miles for adult males, about half that for adult females. Home range size in eastern Washington tends to be larger.

Food and Feeding Habits

- Bobcats are opportunistic and will prey upon a wide variety of animals.
- Food sources include mice, voles, rabbits, gophers, mountain beaver, yellow-bellied marmots (Fig. 2), fawns; also insects, reptiles, birds, and carrion.
- Domestic animals occasionally taken include house cats, poultry, small pigs, and lambs. To prevent conflicts, follow the suggestions under "Preventing Conflicts."
- Bobcats hunt primarily by sight and sound, which means they spend much of their time sitting or crouching, watching, and listening. Once they've located prey, they stalk within range of a quick dash and then pounce.
- A bobcat will cover the remains of a large kill with debris such as snow, grass, or leaves. The bobcat will revisit a carcass until most of it is consumed.

Reproduction and Family Structure

- Bobcats are solitary animals. Males and females only associate for the brief time required for courtship and mating.
- A litter of about 3 kittens is born between April and July in dens found in caves, rock crevices, or hollow logs or trees. The den is carefully lined with dry leaves, moss, or grass formed into a shallow depression.
- Young bobcats disperse when they are about 8 months old.
- There are records of male bobcats mating with female domestic cats; some of the resultant hybrid offspring showed definite characteristics of the bobcats

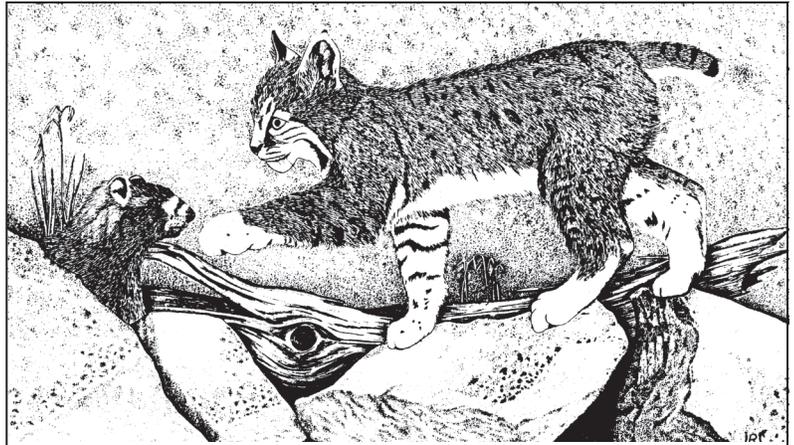


Figure 2. Bobcat and a yellow-bellied marmot.

(Drawing by James R. Christensen)

Mortality and Longevity

- Bobcats are known to live up to 12 years in the wild, but the average life expectancy is probably closer to 3-4 years. In captivity, they may live 25 years.
- Few predators other than cougars and humans are able to kill an adult bobcat. Adult bobcats may receive fatal or debilitating injuries from prey animals.
- Young bobcats are killed by eagles, great horned owls, coyotes, foxes, bears, and adult male bobcats.

Viewing Bobcats

Because of their elusive nature and caution around humans, bobcats are seldom seen. In areas occupied by humans, these cats typically limit their activity to night hours. (In dim light, bobcats see up to six times better than humans.) In undisturbed areas, they can be active at dawn or dusk if prey is active at that time. However, bobcats may be active during any time of day.

Bobcats travel in predictable patterns along logging roads, railways, and trails made by other animals to move between resting areas, food sources, or hunting areas. Evidence of a bobcat's presence may include tracks in snow or mud, droppings, feeding areas, and claw marks on tree trunks.

Tracks

The bobcat track is easily distinguished with a round shape, four toes and no claws evident (Fig. 3). It is generally twice the size of a domestic cat's print and loosely resembles that of a coyote or dog but is more rounded. Fine muddy silt leaves the clearest tracks.

Droppings

Bobcats generally cover their droppings with loose soil, snow, leaves or other material. When visible, their droppings typically resemble those of most species in the dog and cat families, with constricted segments and blunt ends. (See <http://dirttime.ws/DirtTime.htm> for more information.)

Feeding areas (caches)

A bobcat will eat the carcass of a large mammal. Like a cougar, it will cover the carcass remains and frequently return to feed on it. Being smaller than a cougar, a

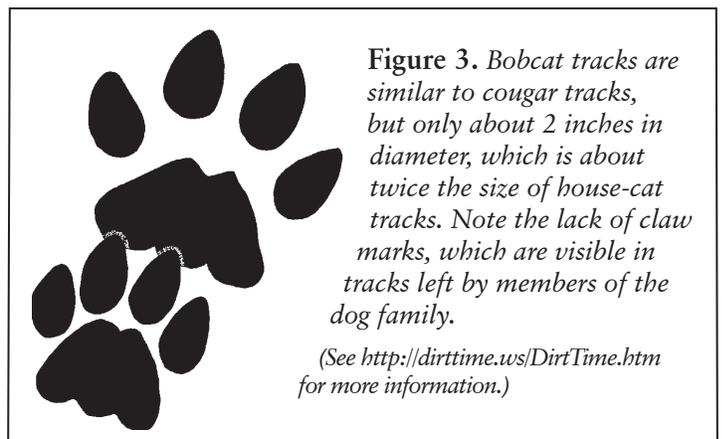


Figure 3. Bobcat tracks are similar to cougar tracks, but only about 2 inches in diameter, which is about twice the size of house-cat tracks. Note the lack of claw marks, which are visible in tracks left by members of the dog family.

(See <http://dirttime.ws/DirtTime.htm> for more information.)

Lynx

Bobcats resemble lynx, however, a number of characteristics distinguish the two cats (Fig. 4). **Most important, you are highly unlikely to see a lynx in western Washington.**

The lynx (*Lynx canadensis*) is the rarest of three cat species native to Washington probably numbering fewer than 50 individuals in the state. Lynx have large feet and long legs that give them a competitive advantage in deep snow over bobcats and other carnivores that might otherwise compete for habitat and prey. Lynx are largely dependent upon a single prey species, the snowshoe hare, but they also eat other mammals, birds, and carrion. Lynx are primarily associated with subalpine and boreal forest types in the mountains of north-central and northeastern Washington.

Prior to 1947, lynx in Washington were classified a “predatory animal” with a bounty of \$5. Lynx were trapped or hunted until 1991 when a decline was readily apparent. It now seems clear that the lynx population in Washington could not sustain perennial exploitation due to the fragmented nature of subalpine-boreal habitats, low density of snowshoe hares, and variable quality of habitat through time. The lynx was listed as a state threatened species in 1993, and became a Threatened species under the Federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) in April 2000.

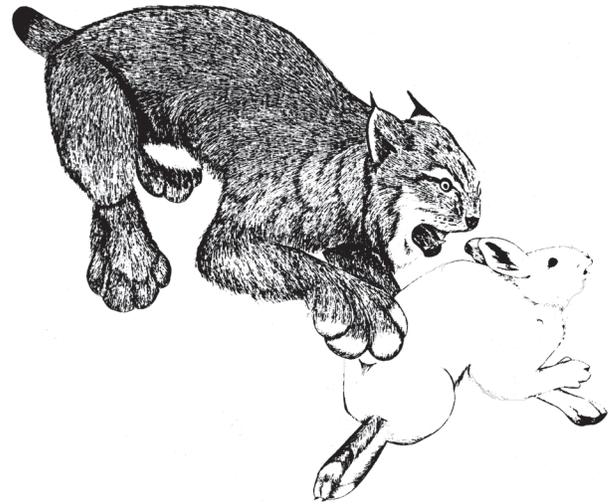


Figure 4. Bobcats tend to be smaller than lynx and do not have the noticeably longer legs and disproportionately larger feet of lynx. Tufts of black hairs are at the tops of a bobcat's ears, however they are significantly smaller than those of lynx. The backs of bobcats' ears have black rims with a white spot in the center. A bobcat's tail (ranging from five inches to eight inches) averages 6.5 inches in length. Although short compared to a domestic cat, the bobcat's tail averages two inches longer than the tail of lynx.
(Drawing by James R. Christensen)

bobcat only reaches out 15 inches to rake up debris to cover the food cache. These marks, and the bobcat's much smaller tracks, help distinguish between bobcat and cougar caches.

Scratching posts

Like house cats scratching furniture, bobcats mark their territory boundaries by leaving claw marks on trees, stumps, and occasionally fence posts. Bobcat claw marks are normally 2 to 3 feet above the ground; domestic cat scratching occurs at a height of about 1-1/2 to 2 feet. (See <http://dirttime.ws/DirtTime.htm> for more information.)

Calls

Bobcats rarely vocalize, although they often yowl and hiss during the mating season, especially when competing males have intentions toward the same receptive female. Such wails have been likened to a child crying, a woman's scream, and the screeching of someone in terrible pain.

Preventing Conflicts

Bobcats are not often responsible for killing domestic animals, but occasionally are responsible for losses of poultry, lambs, small goats, pigs, and house cats. Mostly, bobcats use wild animals as prey items. Once a bobcat causes damage for the first time, it gets easier for the animal to do it again.

Where bobcats are deemed a problem, use the following management strategies around your property to prevent conflicts:

Don't feed wildlife. This includes deer, feral cats (domestic cats gone wild), and other small mammals. Remember predators follow prey.

Prevent the buildup of feeder foods under bird feeders. Bobcats are attracted to the many birds and rodents that come to feeders.

Feed dogs and cats indoors and clean up after them. If you must feed outside, do so in the morning or midday, and pick up food and water bowls, as well as leftovers and spilled food as soon as pets have finished eating. Water, pet food and pet droppings attract small mammals that, in turn, attract bobcats.

Keep dogs and cats indoors, especially from dusk to dawn. Left outside at night, small dogs and cats may become prey for bobcats (which have attacked cocker-spaniel-size dogs).

Enclose poultry (chickens, ducks, and turkeys) in a secure outdoor pen and house: Bobcats will eat poultry if they can get to them. **Note:** Other killers of poultry include coyotes, foxes, skunks, raccoons, feral cats, dogs, opossums, weasels, hawks, and large owls.

If a dead bird is found with no apparent injuries, skinning it may determine what killed it. If the carcass is patterned by red spots where pointed teeth have bruised the flesh but not broken the skin, the bird was probably “played with” by one or more dogs until it died.

To prevent bobcats from accessing birds in their night roosts, equip poultry houses with well-fitted doors.

To prevent bobcats from accessing poultry during the day, completely enclose outdoor pens with 1-inch chicken wire placed over a sturdy wooden framework. Overlap and securely wire all seams on top to prevent bobcats from forcing their way in by using their weight and claws.

Bobcats can climb, so wooden fence posts or structures that give the bobcat footing and access to an otherwise unprotected pen will not be effective. Bobcats also have the ability to jump fences 6 feet or more in height. Use woven wire overhead or a hot wire to prevent access (Fig. 5).

Keep livestock and small animals that live outdoors confined in secure pens during periods of vulnerability. All animals should be confined from dusk to dawn. (Temporary or portable fencing keeps livestock together so that they can be guarded more effectively.) During birthing season, keep young and vulnerable animals confined at all times. Do not use remote pastures or holding areas, especially when there has been a recent bobcat attack. Remove any sick and injured animals immediately. Ensure that young animals have a healthy diet so that they are strong and less vulnerable to predators.

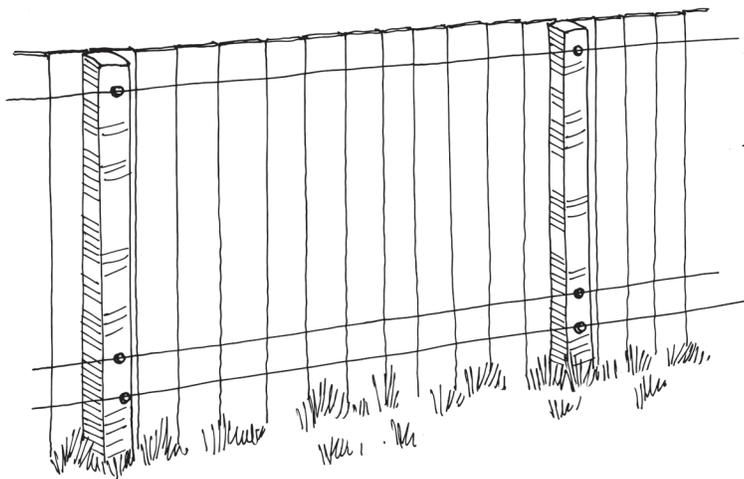


Figure 5. Install two electrified wires, 12 and 18 inches above ground and onto existing fence posts, poultry pen supports, and other structures using the proper insulators. A single strand of wire may be sufficient, but two wires will provide added insurance against the animal making the climb. Run one or two electrified wires towards the top of the fence to prevent bobcats from jumping the lower hot wires and making the climb.

(Drawings by Jenifer Rees.)

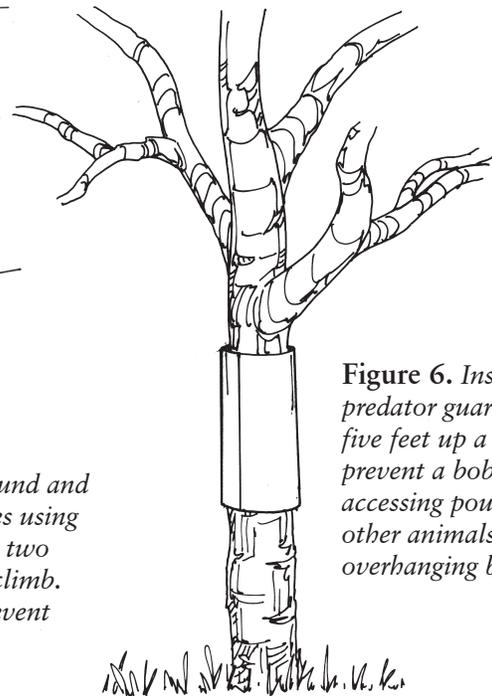


Figure 6. Install a predator guard at least five feet up a tree to prevent a bobcat from accessing poultry or other animals from an overhanging branch.

Livestock producers have discovered that scare devices, such as bright lights, motion detectors connected to recordings of barking dogs or radios will deter bobcats--until they realize that they aren't life-threatening.

For a large property with livestock, consider using a guard animal. There are specialty breeds of dogs that can defend livestock. Donkeys and llamas have also successfully been used as guard animals. As with any guard animal, pros and cons exist. Purchase a guard animal from a reputable breeder who knows the animal he or she sells. Some breeders offer various guarantees on their guard animals, including a replacement if an animal fails to perform as expected.

Repellents, Fumigants, and Toxicants

No chemical repellents, fumigants, or toxicants are currently registered for bobcats.

Trapping

Trapping and relocating a bobcat several miles away seems an appealing method of resolving people/wildlife conflicts because it is perceived as giving the "problem animal" a second chance in a new home. Unfortunately, the reality of the situation is quite different. Bobcats typically try to return to their original territories, often getting hit by a car or killed by a predator in the process. If they remain in the new area, they may get into fights (oftentimes to the death) with resident bobcats.

In many cases, moving bobcats will not solve the original problem because other bobcats will replace them and cause similar conflicts. Hence, it is often more effective to use the above recommendations for making the site less attractive to bobcats than it is to constantly trap them.

Trapping also may not be legal in some cities and communities; check with local authorities. Transporting animals without the proper permit is also unlawful in most cases (see "Legal Status"). See the handout on "Trapping Wildlife" for information on trapping bobcats.

Professional Assistance

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) offices receive hundreds of reports of bobcat sightings each year. Due to time constraints, officers will only respond when there is a threat to public safety.

WDFW calls on the help of private citizens who have skills and training in the capture and handling of wildlife species, including bobcats. Typically these individuals are referred to as "NWCOS" (nuisance wildlife control operators) or simply "trappers." There are approximately 180 NWCOS throughout the state. Although they must be licensed through WDFW, and conform to its regulations, they are not state employees. They operate as private enterprises and set their own fees.

To find a wildlife control operator, contact your WDFW Regional Office for names of companies or individuals that specialize in wildlife control work in your area. Some companies may also be listed under "Pest Control" in your local phone directory. Be aware of some pest control companies that advertise that they offer nuisance wildlife control work. Inquire whether or not the company has a nuisance wildlife control permit.

See the handout "Hiring a Wildlife Damage Control Company" for additional information.

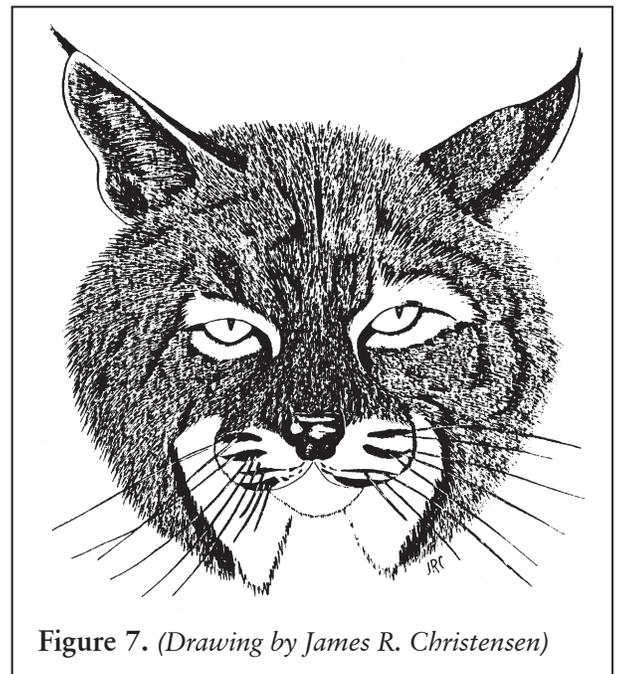


Figure 7. (Drawing by James R. Christensen)

Legal Status

Washington: Bobcats are classified as game animals and an open season and a hunting license are required to hunt them (WAC 232-12-007). A property owner or the owner's immediate family, employee, or tenant may kill a bobcat on that property if it is damaging domestic animals (RCW 77.36.030). No permit is required.

The killing of a bobcat in self-defense, or defense of another, should be reasonable and justified. A person taking such action must have reasonable belief that the bobcat poses a threat of serious physical harm, that this harm is imminent, and the action is the only reasonable available means to prevent that harm.

The body of any bobcat, whether taken under the direct authority of RCW 77.36.030, or for the protection of a person, remains the property of the state and must be turned over to the Department of Fish and Wildlife immediately.

See "Lynx" for legal status of this species.

Additional Information

Books

Maser, Chris. *Mammals of the Pacific Northwest: From the Coast to the High Cascades*. Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1998.

Verts, B. J., and Leslie N. Carraway. *Land Mammals of Oregon*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998.

Internet Resources

Bobcat Vocalizations

<http://www.geocities.com/Yosemite/9152/bobcat-trackers.html>

Final Lynx Recovery Plan: Executive Summary

<http://wdfw.wa.gov/wlm/diversty/soc/recovery/lynx/lynx.htm>

Bobcat Predation

<http://texnat.tamu.edu/ranchref/predator/bobcats/t-bobcat.htm>

Burke Museum's Mammals of Washington

<http://www.washington.edu/burkemuseum/collections/mammalogy/mamwash/mamwash.html>

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Illustrations: As credited

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