



# North American Bobcat

(*Lynx rufus*)



Bobcats have always been present in Rhode Island, with populations fluctuating due to habitat changes and prey availability. Increasing reports suggest the population is on the rise, and ongoing research is considering why this may be happening. Bobcats are highly adaptable, and in recent years their populations appear to be increasing regionally and nationally (Roberts & Crimmins, 2010), despite continuous land development and the threat of habitat loss. This could be due to increasing prey populations, such as cottontail rabbits (*Sylvilagus spp.*), gray squirrels (*Scuirus carolinensis*), other small mammals, or even the white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*). It could also be due to individual bobcats branching out from their usual habitat into more developed areas in search of new territories. Although their reclusive nature can make them a rare sighting, they can sometimes be observed traveling through backyards or walking across roads.

Bobcats rarely present themselves as a danger to humans or to pets. They will occasionally take domestic chickens, ducks, or rabbits, and will sometimes visit birdfeeders in search of squirrels or birds, but in general, their presence in a neighborhood rarely causes a nuisance. More often than not, they are simply an important and non-intrusive part of the ecosystem.

## Description

Bobcat populations vary slightly from region to region in home range size, habitat, appearance, and prey selection. Those found in New England average between 13 and 30 lbs. and measure between 32 and 34 inches long, with a height of around 22 inches. The males are typically larger than the females, often exceeding 30 pounds. The tail is “bobbed” and only about four inches long on average, although it can be longer. Individuals found in the Northeast tend to have less spotting on their coat than bobcats found in other parts of North America, causing them to sometimes be mistaken for mountain lions. Bobcat fur is reddish to tawny brown with black spots and stripes along their body, and large white spots which adorn the back of their tufted ears: a key identifying characteristic.





**Above:** Photo courtesy of J. Donaldson, Charlestown, RI

**Left:** Bobcat tracks in snow. Front paw length average 4.1 – 6.4 cm ( $1^{5/8}$  –  $2^{1/2}$  in.) (Elbroch, 2003). Photos courtesy of C. Brown.

## **Life History**

### **Range and Habitat:**

Bobcats are the most numerous and widely distributed wild felines in North America. They can be found from the boreal regions of Canada, in almost every state in the U.S., and as far south as Mexico. Over time, this species has adapted to live in a variety of habitats including swamps, grassland, shrubland, forest, mountains, and agricultural land.



Photo courtesy of G. Williams, Hopkinton, R.I.

### **Behavior:**

Bobcats are solitary animals, only comingling during the mating season or while females are rearing young. Rather than being nocturnal, bobcats are crepuscular, which means they are most active during dawn and dusk. They can travel between one and twelve miles in a night. Bobcats have excellent hearing and vision, and have large feet that are well adapted to climbing and moving through snow. During the breeding season and while rearing young, females may establish dens in caves or rocky areas, but may also den in brush piles, thickets, hollow logs, or exposed roots. Bobcats are territorial animals, with their territory size depending on season, sex, and prey distribution and abundance.

### **Food Habits:**

In New England, the bobcat's diet consists mostly of cottontail rabbits and snowshoe hares, but they will also eat other small mammals, such as mice, voles, woodchucks, and chipmunks, as well as birds. They are capable of killing white-tailed deer, usually attacking it while it is bedded down. They are ambush predators, meaning they stalk their prey before pouncing. Bobcats can tolerate long periods without food, and then eat heavily when it becomes available again.



Bobcat scat. Photo courtesy of C. Brown, Westerly, RI.



Photo courtesy of C. Brown, South Kingstown, R.I.

### **Reproduction:**

The mating season begins in February or March, and birthing will begin in May or June, when a female will have a litter of two to five kittens and rear them by herself. Juveniles will often stay with the mother through their first winter, sometimes until the next breeding season. Juvenile males tend to leave the maternal home range earlier than their female siblings and may wander widely in search of habitat unoccupied by mature males. Female kittens may breed after one year, while males typically begin breeding after two years.

### **Diseases**

Rabies can infect bobcats, just like all other mammalian species, but bobcats are not a common host for this disease and to date there have been no confirmed cases in Rhode Island.

### **Threats**

The biggest threat facing bobcats in Rhode Island are roads; bobcats have large home ranges and are forced to cross roads in search of food. They are also facing habitat loss and degradation as urban areas continue to spread into undeveloped landscapes.

### **Avoiding Problems**

Free-ranging poultry and domestic rabbits are at risk to prey by bobcats and other predators such as fox, coyote, and raccoons if they are not properly secured. To avoid predation, properly constructed enclosures and keeping animals indoors after dark is necessary. Bobcats are good climbers; fences should be high enough to discourage them from climbing over. Top cover for enclosures can also protect against climbing, as well as aerial predators.

### **Regulatory Status**

Bobcats are classified under general law (RIGL 20-16-1) as a protected furbearer in Rhode Island. There is no open hunting or trapping season for bobcats. It is illegal to possess the carcass of a bobcat and road-kills should be reported to the Division of Fish and Wildlife. The carcass provides valuable biological information, such as population age structure, dietary habits and reproductive potential.

Property owners, as provided for under RIGL 20-16-2, may kill, by legal means, any furbearer on their own property that is killing livestock, domestic pets, damaging property or crops, provided that the carcass of the animal is turned over to the Division of Fish and Wildlife. The taking of road-killed



Photo courtesy of G. Williams. Hopkinton, RI.

furbearers, including bobcats, is prohibited without special authorization from the Division of Fish and Wildlife. The law also does not allow for the random taking of wildlife, for the taking of furbearers for their pelts outside the open season, or for killing of animals outside the boundaries of the property of the person with the problem. Also, it does not allow for unlawful methods of take such as poisons, snares, foothold traps, or discharge of firearms in violation of state or local ordinances. The law states that animals taken must be reported to the DEM within 24 hours.

The RIDEM does not recommend that property owners attempt to live trap nuisance furbearers unless they are prepared and willing to euthanize the offending animal. State regulations prohibit the live capture and translocation of furbearers. Captured furbearers can only legally be released on the property on which they were captured. Sighting reports and complaints regarding bobcats can be reported to the Great Swamp Field Office at (401) 789-0281 or by emailing DEM.DFW@dem.ri.gov.

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### **Selected References**

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