

Ohio Division of Wildlife
Life History Notes
Bobcat

Scientific Name: *Felis rufus*



**State
Endangered
Species**

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Introduction

The bobcat is a species that is native to Ohio, and one of seven cat species found in North America. Domestic cats belong to the same family, Felidae, as the bobcat. The bobcat has a small face with a short nose, small round ears and claws that retract—characteristics of all cats wild and domestic. However, the bobcat has only three upper jaw teeth behind its canine teeth; domestic house cats have four.

Bobcats are very rarely seen in Ohio as they were extirpated from the state around 1850. Prior to settlement, they were common throughout Ohio. This cat has been sighted occasionally since 1850 and may be on the verge of returning “home” to Ohio; between 1970 and 1996 there have been 24 verified reports of bobcats in the state, but 14 of these reports have occurred since 1990.

As with any species of wildlife, survival is a daily challenge. When they are young, bobcats may be preyed upon by foxes, owls, coyotes, mountain lions, and adult male bobcats. Under the best circumstances, a bobcat can live as long as 12 years in the wild. The average life span, however, is much shorter.

Description

The bobcat has short, dense, soft fur. Their coat color varies to include light gray, yellowish brown, buff, brown, and reddish brown on the upper parts of the body. The fur on the middle of the back is frequently darker than that on the sides. Underparts and the inside of the legs are generally a whitish color with dark spots or bars. The back of the bobcat’s ears are black

with white spots. The top of the tip of the ears are black; on the lynx, a cousin of the bobcat, the entire tip of the ear is black. The bobcat’s tail is also black.

Bobcats’ weight can vary widely with reported weights ranging from 12 to 68 pounds for an adult male and 9 to 34 pounds for an adult female. On average though, a male bobcat will weigh 28 pounds and a female 15 pounds. Adult male bobcats are between 32 and 37 inches long with the females slightly smaller, ranging from 29 to 34 inches in length. Regardless of sex, the bobcat has a five- to six-inch long tail.

Habitat and Habits

Generally, the bobcat is a solitary animal, territorial and elusive by nature. Adult females have an extremely low tolerance for other adult females in their home range. The males of this species are more tolerant of another male within the home range.

Bobcats can cover a sizeable territory. Considerable variation has been reported in the size of a bobcat’s home range (from 0.2 to 78 square miles). The home range of the male is usually two to five times larger than the female’s. Home range location and size is in part determined by the availability of food, sheltered rock outcrops, the animal’s sex, geographic region, and the area’s defensibility. The population density of the species in a region also has an effect; the greater the number of bobcats in an area, the smaller the home range. In Minnesota, bobcat ranges are estimated to be 2 to 46 square miles for a female and 14 to 61 square miles for a male.

Bobcats aren't as aggressive hunters as might be expected; they generally lie in wait for their prey, pouncing when an animal comes near. Prey pursuit rarely extends more than 60 feet. Rabbits and rodents are the bobcat's principal food. Deer are also occasionally taken, especially in the northern portions of the bobcat's continental range. Deer are killed by a bite through the neck, either in the jugular or spine region. Once killed, the bobcat will consume the hindquarters of the deer first. Uneaten portions are frequently stored and hidden and then consumed over a period of days. Bobcats will also consume insects, fish, reptiles, amphibians, birds, and other mammals.

Bobcats are considered crepuscular; they are most active in both the early evening and early morning hours. However, they may move around at anytime during the day or night. Most activities occur from three hours before sunset and on to midnight and begin again an hour before until approximately four hours after sunrise.

Bobcats have a range that extends throughout North America from southern Canada to northern Mexico, except along the mid-Atlantic Coast and through the Midwest where intensive human habitation and agriculture have led to its extirpation. Bobcats may be found in a wide variety of habitats ranging from lowland swamps to partially forested mountainous areas; understory density can vary from open areas such as a stand of pines to more dense areas of growth like a regenerating clear cut area.

Reproduction and Care of Young

Bobcats are polygamous breeders, meaning the male will mate with more than one female and no bond is established between the pair. Females of this species become sexually mature at 9 to 12 months of age; males are about 18 months old before they reach sexual maturity. Bobcats remain capable of reproducing throughout their lives.

Breeding may occur at anytime throughout the year; mostly it occurs from December through May with kittens produced about 63 days after mating. When available, the female will use an area of rock outcroppings as a natal den. The average litter size is two or three kittens, but as few as one and as many as six young may be born to a litter. The young are born helpless and are dependent on the mother. At birth, the bobcat is completely furred with its eyes closed. Young bobcats' eyes will open in 3 to 11 days, 10 days is typical. The young are fully weaned at eight weeks and they will disperse and begin life on their own in the fall and late winter.

Females generally produce one litter a year. A female that loses a litter may produce another litter in the same year. This is possible because bobcats are spontaneous ovulators—estrus occurs every 40 to 44 days in females that have failed to conceive.

Management Plans

Bobcats are classified as an endangered species in Ohio. Their status in the state is monitored through verified records and reported observations. They are afforded full protection under the law.

Viewing Opportunities

Due to their naturally elusive and secretive behavior patterns, an extremely low population, and the limited range within Ohio, the chance to see this endangered animal is limited. An encounter with a bobcat in this state is a rarity. Virtually all verified records of bobcats have been confined to the eastern, southeastern, and south-central regions of Ohio.

Do Something Wild!

The bobcat is among the majority of wildlife species in Ohio that are not hunted. All of these animals are vital parts of our overall ecosystem and contribute to wildlife diversity in the state. Helping us manage and research these species are the generous citizens of Ohio. With money they either donated through the state income tax checkoff, by the purchase of a wildlife license plate, or their direct contribution to the Endangered Species Special Account, the Division is able to purchase critical habitat essential to sustaining endangered species or provide educational materials on species such as the bobcat.

Contributions to our Endangered Species and Wildlife Diversity Program are accepted throughout the year. To make a donation, please send a check to: Endangered Species Special Account, Ohio Division of Wildlife, 2045 Morse Road, Bldg. G, Columbus, Ohio 43229-6693. All contributions, whether made on your income tax return or directly, are tax deductible.



At a Glance

Mating: Polygamous

Peak of Breeding Activity: December through May

Gestation: 63 days

Young Are Born: Most litters are produced between early February and late July. Kittens are helpless and totally dependent on the female.

Litter Size: Litters range from 1 to 6 kittens. Average is 2+.

Number of Litters per Year: Typically 1. A second litter may be produced if the first litter is lost.

Adult Weight: The range is from 12-68 pounds for males and 9-34 for females. Male average is 28 pounds and female average is 15 pounds.

Adult Length: Males are 32-37 inches; females are 29-34 inches.

Life Expectancy: 12 years; the average is much less.

Migration Patterns: Non-migratory

Activity Periods: Bobcats are crepuscular; most movement occurs during the late afternoon and early evening hours and for a few hours at sunrise.

Typical Foods: Bobcats are carnivores and will consume a wide variety of insects, reptiles, amphibians, fish, birds, and mammals. Rabbits and, in northern latitudes, white-tailed deer are important components of the bobcat's diet.

Native to Ohio: Yes

Active or Potential Nuisance Species: No, but may be perceived by some as a potential threat.

The bobcat is classified as a state endangered species and receives full protection under Ohio law.

