Bobcat's role of increasing importance to Arizona's ecosystem

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by Jo Walker

There are seven species of native cats in North America: the jaguar, cougar, Canada lynx, bobcat, ocelot, jaguarundi, and margay.

The bobcat is smaller than the jaguar, mountain lion (cougar) and ocelot. While 11 to 14 subspecies of bobcat have been described, there are few differences of real biological significance, since color and markings are too variable to distinguish and measurements often overlap.

In 1976 the bobcat was listed as present in 47 states. The bobcat is the most common wild member of the cat family in the Southwest. With the increasing scarcity of larger cat species the bobcat role is of increasing importance to the ecosystem.

Bobcats are distributed throughout Arizona, occuring in every habitat, with the exception of heavily developed urban areas. They occur from near sea level to 12,000 feet elevation, with highest densities in Sonoran desert-scrub and Great Basin conifer woodland between 3,000 and 6,000 feet above sea level.

Since 1980 Arizona has legally classified the bobcat as both a furbearer and a predator, though they have never been bountied by Arizona. The state population has been estimated at 40,000, with a yearly loss of 1,000 hunted and 7,500 trapped.

The bobcat appears about twice the size of a domestic cat due to the bobcat's large boned structure, particularly in the legs and head. The bobcat is a chunky, robust animal with long muscular legs and large spreading paws. They have round faces with wide mutton chops.

The coloration is a pale brown to reddish brown, various streaked or spotted with black or dark brown. The underparts are white with black spots and there are several black bars along the insides of the forelegs. Their prominent ears have short tufts.

The back of the ear is black with a central white spot. The short (5-6 inch) blunt tail has black bars on top and white underside.

The fur of the bobcat is dense, short, and very soft with tremendous individual variation in color. The summer coat is shorter and frequently more rufous than the winter.

Varying measurements given for the bobcat include a length of 28 to 42 inches, height of 15 inches, and weight of 15 to 40 pounds. Male bobcats are generally about 33 percent larger in body weight than females.

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There are four toes on the hind feet. The front feet are larger and show only 4 toes in the track, but there is a 5th toe that is raised. The pads are relatively large and well defined in the track.

Their track is more rounded than that of the coyote or dog and shows no claw marks. Those retractile claws are strong and extremely sharp. Because of their reclusive nature, that track may be all you see of a neighboring bobcat.

Social structure of the bobcat, which is mostly avoidance of each other, except at mating time, appears to be maintained in part by a complex system of scent marking involving urine, feces, the anal glands, and by scraping with the feet.

The bobcats' wide repertoire of vocalizations include purr, mew, hiss, growl, yowl and scream.

Older bobcats usually have a territory or home range that is fairly well defined, yet varies in size depending on prey density, sex, season, and climate, and has been reported as anywhere from half an acre to 60 square miles.

Adult males have larger ranges and travel much farther before returning to the same spot. Rock piles or broken rocky ledges and brushy areas are used for refuge, breeding, raising young, and shelter from severe weather.

Litters of two to three kittens are born with their eyes closed in rocky dens — usually in April or May. At about two weeks, their eyes begin to open, and by the end of their fourth week they will be exploring their surroundings.

By this time solid food is required to sustain weight increase and they are fully weaned about the seventh or eighth week. They then follow their mother learning to hunt, and may not go off on their own until some time in the winter.

Hunting behavior is stop, sit, wait or watch; then creep, crouch and pounce. They run with an awkward gait and haven't the endurance for a long chase. They capture prey with stealth rather than pursuit.

While bobcats prefer rabbit, their diet can include in addition to cottontail and jackrabbits; rodents, large insects, snakes, birds, lizards, toads and frogs, rock squirrels, ground squirrels and carrion.

There have been rare reports of their killing young or weak deer, antelope, bighorn sheep, and javelina. In a 1965 study of captive bobcats 91 percent of the food intake was assimilated. They seem able to maintain weight on an alternating feast-famine regimen.

The bobcat are most active during the hours around dawn and dusk, or when their prey is most active, depending on temperature. One may cover as many as 20 miles on its solitary evening hunting foray.

As a carnivore, the bobcat are hunters rather than hunted; but they are both pursuer and pursued. Their enemies, especially when young, are owls, hawks, coyotes, dogs, mountain lions, and people.