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Acton WildAware Beacon Article

By Paula Goodwin

Bobcats

The bobcat is the most abundant wildcat in the U.S. and has the greatest range of all native North American cats. The bobcat is the only species of wild cat now found in Massachusetts. Bobcats can adapt well to such diverse habitats as forests, swamps, and even suburban areas. They are shy and elusive, most active at night, making sightings by people uncommon. Sudbury Valley Trustees' Nature Sightings web page has reported 2 recent bobcat sightings; One on October 26, 2016 in Harvard and another on December 6, 2016 in Stow. In January of this year, a bobcat was sighted in Acton off Central Street near Mount Hope Cemetery.

Identifying a bobcat can be confusing. Many are mistaken for the much larger Mountain Lion which is found thousands of miles away in 14 western states and an isolated population in Florida. An adult Mountain Lion is 4 to 6 feet in length with a long heavy tail, while a bobcat is only 2 to 3.5 feet long with a shorter, "bobbed" looking tail. Male bobcats are about one third larger than females. Because of their similar, though larger profile, bobcats may be mistaken for very large domestic pet cats, as they are about twice the size of the average cat. To add to the confusion, not all bobcats have the stereotypical spots associated with them. Some bobcats are smaller than others. However, all bobcats have traits that are the same, no matter what their size or age. For example, bobcats have a crisp, white lining around their very round hazel/gold color eyes. Once they have reached about eight weeks of age, all bobcats have black ears with a distinctive white patch in the center although the small black tuft at the top of their ears may not be obvious. The short "bobbed" looking tail always has a noticeable black tip on it, usually with a little white spot on the very end. Adult bobcats have a distinctive "ruff" around the face that gives the appearance of wide sideburns. In summer, the bobcat's fur is short and dense, varying in color from yellowish to reddish brown with distinct or faint black spots along its flanks and white underparts. Its winter coat becomes longer and much paler, although there can be much variation in color among individual animals.

A bobcat's hind legs are proportionately longer than their front legs in comparison to the domesticated cat. Bobcat tracks may sometimes be confused with the tracks of domestic house cats although adult bobcat prints are much larger. Bobcat tracks typically measure up to 2.5 inches in length and up to 2 5/8 in width. Bobcat tracks have four toes in the front and back although the front foot actually has five toes. The fifth toe is raised high on the forefeet so it does not leave an impression when it walks. The claws also do not leave an impression as they are usually retracted.

Bobcats are shy, solitary, and generally elusive animals. Although they are generally silent, bobcats have a large repertoire of noises that they can produce. They do not make the same sounds as the domesticated cat. Instead, they make a series of grunts, yowls,

whines and growls and the patterns of these noises actually can make up a language of their own.

Male bobcats have an established range which includes the smaller ranges of several females, and often overlaps partially with other males' territories. Female ranges are more exclusive. Territories are marked by scent and scratch marks on trees. Breeding occurs between February and March, and the kittens are born 62 days later. Litters consist of one to four young which are blind and helpless at birth and have a thick coat of spotted fur. Birth dens are located in caves, under ledges, in hollow logs, or other protected locations, and are lined with dried vegetation. The male is not involved in the raising of the young. Female bobcats bring meat to their young and teach them how to hunt after they are weaned, staying with them for almost a year. Young males disperse and travel long distances in search of an unoccupied territory, while females often settle near or partially within the range of their mother.

Their carnivorous diet is medium-sized mammals such as rabbits. Larger prey such as deer are likely to be killed only when injured or otherwise vulnerable. When food is plentiful, they will cache it.

Bobcats prefer to avoid people rather than to interact with them. As with all wildlife, do not attempt to approach one, particularly if they have young. Bobcats are known to kill livestock as well as unsupervised small pets. Bobcats are susceptible to rabies. Bobcat conservation status is "Least Concern", and their average life span in the wild is 10-12 years.

RESOURCES

Mass Wildlife

<http://www.mass.gov/eea/agencies/dfg/dfw/fish-wildlife-plants/mammals/bobcat-in-mass-generic.html>

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife-Preventing Conflicts

<http://wdfw.wa.gov/living/bobcats>.

Mass Audubon <http://www.massaudubon.org/learn/nature-wildlife/mammals/bobcats>

Sudbury Valley Trustees Nature Sightings

<http://www.svtweb.org/properties/nature-sightings/species/bobcat>

National Geographic- <http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/bobcat/>

BioKids-Kids' Inquiry of Diverse Species-

http://www.biokids.umich.edu/critters/Lynx_rufus/

National Bobcat Rescue and Research- <http://www.nbr.org/identify>

Bobcat tracks

http://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-153-10370_12145_43573-146656--,00.html

Paula Goodwin is a member of the Acton Conservation Commission who introduced WildAware with Acton Natural Resource Assistant Bettina Abe. WildAware is a program sponsored by the Town of Acton Natural Resources Department that began in September and will continue through the summer of 2016. The purpose of WildAware is to educate the community about the existence and habits of wild creatures, and the goal is increased community awareness of shared habitats. For information, call 978-929-6634 or send email to nr@acton-ma.gov.