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Preventing and controlling problem bobcats

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Quick Facts

- Colorado law classifies the bobcat as a varmint so that it can be taken anytime by an agricultural producer when it is killing poultry or livestock.
- Depredation by bobcats generally is a random occurrence.
- Bobcats in recent years have been extremely valuable to the fur trade.
- The bobcat population in Colorado is considered safe and well managed.
- Bobcats are shy and cautious and may be warded off by bright lights, loud music or dogs; fencing an area with a coyote-proof fence will help avoid bobcat damage.
- Bobcats may be livetrapped and moved out of the area.
- Bobcats that are causing damage may be controlled by various trapping devices and dispatched humanely.

The bobcat, *Lynx rufus*, is found in all Colorado counties in varying abundance. Colorado law classifies the bobcat as a "varmint" so that it can be taken anytime by an agricultural producer when it is killing poultry or livestock. However, sport hunting and trapping of bobcats is limited to a season set between Oct. 1 and March 31.

The bobcat ranges in size from 15 to 40 pounds (7-18 kilograms), has acute hearing and vision. It ranges in color from a reddish, light tan to a blueish gray on its back. Its belly usually is white with varying degrees of black spotting. It can be distinguished from the Canadian lynx by a lack of pronounced ear tufts and a difference in tail color. The bobcat tail tip is black on top, light beneath; the lynx tail tip is entirely black.

Bobcats breed year around but produce most young during spring and early summer. The gestation period is between 50 to 60 days. Normal litter sizes range from one to five kittens. Bobcats occasionally will interbreed with housecats in southern states to produce an odd-looking animal called a wampus cat.

Bobcats inhabit mountains, foothills, timbered river bottoms, rough canyon lands, river breaks and lightly timbered hill country. They prefer rocky outcroppings and closely available escape cover. They may wander a 25- to 50-mile (40- to 80-kilometer) circuit, but spend most of their time within a two- to five-square-mile (5- to 13-km²) area.

In Colorado, bobcats are most abundant on the front range, the canyon country of the southeast, pinyon-juniper and oak brush vegetation zones, and elevations between 5,000 and 9,000 feet (1,500-2,700 meters).

Bobcat Habits

Bobcats prefer rabbits and small rodents for food. They are opportunists when it comes to food selection, but prefer to kill their food rather than eating carrion or plant materials. They sometimes have a locally heavy impact on wild and domestic turkeys, game birds and poultry, deer, hogs and sheep. Bobcats will eat domestic housecats and dogs, apparently with relish. They serve as an aid in controlling feral cats and dogs over parts of the range.

Bobcats generally are crepuscular and nocturnal in habits. They are secretive animals that avoid humans. They go about their business in a cautious and unspectacular way. Bobcats often live in close proximity to people without people being aware of it.

Mountain lions, coyotes, feral dogs, golden eagles and great horned owls occasionally prey on bobcats—both adults and kittens. Predation is not considered very important in controlling populations of bobcats. Historically, bobcat and lynx populations have followed the cycles of rabbits and rodents. Since the bobcat has much less adaptable food habits than the coyote, it is much more susceptible to large population declines as a result of restricted food supplies.

Bobcat depredation generally is a random occurrence. Bobcats usually kill one or two animals and feed very neatly on the carcass. Once they establish an easy food source, they may return repeatedly, quietly taking a chicken, pig or domestic duck each night until the owner discovers the missing domestic animals.

Claw and tooth marks on the upper neck, head and shoulders are characteristic of a bobcat kill on larger animals. Feeding bobcats will cut into the abdominal cavity of the kill and neatly eat the organs, chew off the muscles from the bones and peel away the skin.

Bobcat tracks are rounded, clawless and about the size of coyote tracks. Scats, scratch marks on the ground around the carcass and materials scratched onto the carcass are signs that bobcats leave at the kill site. Poultry, small lambs, pigs and other animals may disappear, carried off by bobcats to be eaten in a secure place.

Bobcats in recent years have been extremely valuable to the fur trade, commanding prices from \$50 to \$350 per pelt. Taking bobcats to stop damage should be delayed to periods of fur primeness, if possible.

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Bobcat populations can absorb a 25- to 40-percent annual harvest. Since bobcats are susceptible to trapping and dog hunting, local populations can be over-harvested. The bobcat population in Colorado is estimated at about 42,000 animals with an annual take of about 6,000. It is considered safe and well managed.

The flesh of bobcats is excellent. When roasted, it has a light color and fine texture with a milk pork-like flavor.

Damage Control

Nonlethal control methods

Bobcats are cautious and shy. Bright lights, revolving or flashing white lights, a radio or record player playing all night, a dog tied in the area where losses are occurring, all may help in warding off damage. Red or blue lights are not recommended since bobcats do not have acute color vision.

Fencing bobcats out with coyote-proof fencing will help avoid losses.

Repellents recommended in Service in Action sheet 6.508, *Controlling feral and nuisance cats*, also may be effective in warding off bobcats. Caution should be used if a chemical repellent is selected since the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has not specifically registered repellent chemicals for use on bobcats.

Sometimes bobcats can be taken in large box traps or commercially available live traps. A 50-gallon (189-liter) drum rigged with a falling door triggered by a treadle and baited with a live chicken, duck or feral cat may be used successfully to trap the animals. Bobcats occasionally will wander into tight places, such as culverts, barrels or pens. Livetrapped bobcats may have to be moved several hundred miles (kilometers) to insure they do not return.

Snares can be used effectively to livetrapped bobcats. The snare should be modified by clamping a lead sinker on it to allow a large enough loop for the bobcat to breathe, but small enough to hold the animal. After capture, the cat can be lassoed or handled with a hog catcher to move it into a pen or container for transfer. Bobcats are dangerous and should be handled with care. Help in handling them should be requested if necessary.

Lethal control methods

Snares set without a stop are effective when set in cubbies, on trails or along fences near bobcat paths. A coyote-size snare works well.

Effective baits for bobcats include live or freshly killed poultry, fresh carcasses of jackrabbits, rodents, muskrats, beaver, squirrels or feral cats. Fish baits, including sardines and fermented carp, have been used successfully. Catnip oil, oil of rhodium and beaver castor lures also are very effective.

Bobcats are trapped easily by using leghold or killer traps (No. 3 or No. 4). Bobcats are not as trap shy as coyotes, but traps should be bedded in the ground and covered with dirt. See Service in Action sheet 6.511 for illustrated bobcat sets using leghold and Conibear traps.

Trapping devices are most effective when set near bobcat trails. First the area should be scouted carefully to determine how the animal is approaching and leaving. Sets then should be placed close to these travel routes.

Trapped bobcats can be dispatched humanely by shooting. The bullet should be placed into the brain, between the eyes, or between the shoulder blades, through the spine and heart in one shot.

Bobcats can be captured or killed successfully by using trail hounds to tree the animals. If the owner of a bobcat hound is available, this person might be contacted for assistance in ridding an area of bobcats.

Bobcats respond well to a distressed rabbit predator call. For best results, the call should be used quietly and slowly for 30 to 45 minutes during early morning and late evening hours in the vicinity of previous bobcat damage. A bobcat usually approaches slowly, cautiously, and often undetected. When calling apparently has been unsuccessful, a person should walk a 30-yard (27-meter) circle around the call location to jump a cat that may have approached unnoticed.

Since bobcats prefer to kill their own food, toxicants placed in baits are not effective for controlling the animals. EPA does not register toxicants for bobcat damage control.

Summary

The bobcat is a valuable part of the wildlife community. It usually is easily tolerated. Lethal control, if necessary, can be delayed until the valuable fur can be harvested during prime season.

The occurrence of bobcats in an area can be pleasurable when a person takes the time and effort to discover them. Their tracks can be located under bridges, on ledges, in cow trails and in the sand of dry creek beds. Their weird caterwauls add a thrill to any spring evening.