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BOBCATS

Photo courtesy Meghan Roos



Photo courtesy Meghan Roos



Photo courtesy Tim Cochnauer



LET'S LOOK AT.....

BOBCATS

What Idaho carnivore is brownish; has a short tail; is very secretive; and lives in many parts of Idaho? If you guessed bobcat, you are right! Bobcats are Idaho's smallest wild cat. About twice the size of your pet cat, they are brownish with dark streaks and spots, and have a white belly. They have short tufts of hair on the tips of their ears. A bobcat's face looks very wide because of its fluffy cheek tufts. Bobcats get their name from their short tail. Years ago, the word "bob" was often used to mean short. Because this cat has a short tail, people called it a "bob-tailed" cat. Over time it was shortened to the name we use today.



Photo courtesy Sean Bascom

Bobcats are the most common wild cat in the United States. They are able to live in many different kinds of habitats such as forests, swamps, and deserts. In these habitats, bobcats set up their territories. Male bobcats have larger territories than females. But territory size also increases depending upon the season. According to a study done here in Idaho, winter bobcat territories are four times larger than summer territories. In winter, food can be scarce so bobcats need larger areas in which to hunt. Bobcats are solitary animals so they mark their territories to keep other bobcats away. Marking a territory is done pretty much by using the bathroom on scent posts like logs, rocks, and bushes. It sounds gross to us, but this kind of scent marking is a very good way to tell other bobcats to keep out! Aren't you glad you can mark your stuff using a marker?

By having a territory, a bobcat makes sure that it has food, water, and shelter. Bobcats eat mostly smaller mammals such as rabbits, hares, voles, and squirrels. They hunt by stealth, sneaking up on their prey. When a bobcat hunts, it will walk quietly through an area and stop often. Their fur helps them to blend into their surroundings. When food walks near, the bobcat will pounce and dinner is served. Bobcats can pounce 10 feet in one leap! Territories also provide shelter. Bobcats like rocky ledges that they use to get out of the weather, to rest, or to raise their young.

Bobcat kittens are born in late April or early May. Kittens start exploring their den as soon as their eyes open at 10 days old. By four weeks, they are ready to follow their mother on short hikes. How fast they grow depends on how much food their mother brings them. By winter, most young bobcats strike out on their own to find a territory.



Photo courtesy Jim & Holly Akenson

Look for bobcats when you are hiking. You will have to be very observant to see one of these secretive wild cats.

THE FOREST GHOST



Photo courtesy IDFG

The lynx is Idaho's least common wild cat. They look similar to a bobcat except that they are larger with a grayer coat. Lynx also have very long legs and huge paws. In the winter these big feet are covered by dense hair which helps the feet to act as snowshoes. This makes it easier for the lynx to get around in the deep snow. Like bobcats, lynxes also have ear tufts. A bobcat's ear tufts may be about an inch long, but a lynx's ear tufts will be two inches long. Both species also have short tails tipped in black. While only the top part of a bobcat's tail is black, the entire tail tip is black on a lynx. Settlers used to say that it looked like a lynx had dipped the end of its tail in ink.

The lynx lives in northern forests with many thickets and other places to hide. The largest part of their range is across most of Canada and into Alaska. Parts of northern Idaho and western Montana as well as the northern parts of Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan are also places where lynx have been found. Finding lynxes is very difficult because they are secretive, solitary animals. Even experienced hunters and other outdoorsmen that spend years in lynx habitat may never see one.

The favorite food of the lynx is snowshoe hare. In the winter, snowshoe hares make up most of a lynx's diet. In the summer, lynxes will also eat grouse, voles, mice, squirrels and even foxes, but they still eat mostly snowshoe hares. Because lynxes are so dependent upon snowshoe hares, their numbers go up and down along with the hares'. When the snowshoe hare population is high, there are more lynxes. When the number of snowshoe hares goes down, so does the number of lynxes. Biologists have studied snowshoe hares and lynxes. They found that snowshoe hare populations depend on willow plants. If willows die off, then snowshoe hare populations get smaller and so do lynx populations. So, lynxes also depend on willow plants to feed the snowshoe hares that the lynxes need to eat. It is kind of funny to think that a carnivore like a lynx has to depend upon a plant!

HERE KITTY, KITTY

Do you have a pet cat? Cats have been our companions for thousands of years. The ancient Egyptians worshipped cats. Farmers have traditionally kept cats to protect grain from mice. Cats appear in many of our favorite stories or cartoons such as The Cat in the Hat and Garfield. Cats have been part of our lives for so long, that sometimes we forget that they were domesticated from small wild cats.

Wild cats can be found on every continent except Antarctica and in the Arctic. Some of the world's largest carnivores are wild cats such as lions, tigers, and leopards. The world's fastest animal is a cat, the cheetah. If you think of a colorful animal, you might think of a tiger, jaguar, or ocelot. Their colors and bold markings help them blend into their surroundings, camouflaging them.

Fossils of ancient cats have been found that are estimated to be several million years old. These ancient cats include the enormous saber-toothed tiger. Fortunately for us, today's cats are not quite as large and have much smaller teeth! Cats have excellent hearing and vision that they use to find food. They can also move very quietly because their claws are retractable (ree-TRACT-able). This means that they can pull their claws up into their toes. Claws make noise so being able to retract them helps cats move almost silently. If you have a dog and a cat, listen to them move across a hard floor to hear the difference.

All cats are stealth hunters. Many species use a "hunting lay" in which to wait for prey. This is a long, narrow bed where the cat waits. Hunting lays are in places where the cat can see in many directions, but is hidden from other animals. These lays can be under a bush or rock, near a log or even in a tree.

In Idaho, we have three different species of wild cats, the mountain lion, bobcat, and lynx. Mountain lions are the largest of the three, and the only wild cat in Idaho with a long tail. Lynx and bobcat look very similar, but have several important differences. All three species are very secretive and difficult to observe unless you are in the right place at the right time!

PREDATOR

A predator is an animal that eats other animals. When we think of predators, we usually think of something big that has huge claws and a mouthful of sharp teeth. But predators come in all shapes and sizes. Think of the spider catching bugs in your garden. It is a predator. So is the trout that eats a smaller fish, and so are the bats catching flying insects at night!



Photo courtesy Frank Lundburg

If you are a predator, you want to be able to catch your food easily. To do that you need excellent senses of hearing, sight, and smell. These senses work together to help you find your food. Once you find a potential meal, you want to be able to sneak up on your food. A predator that crashes through the bushes making a lot of noise will probably go hungry. Being quiet and stealthy is very important for predators. Camouflage is another important adaptation for many predators, and most predators are not brightly colored. A bright pink predator would have a hard time staying hidden as it hunts for its food. Predators also need to be able to catch their food. This is where those claws, teeth, beaks, webs, talons, and large mouths come in. You want to be able to catch and kill your food quickly so you get the energy you need to survive.

. . . .AND PREY

A prey animal is one that is eaten by a predator. With all the adaptations that predators have, it would seem that prey animals do not stand a chance. But most prey animals have quite a few tricks of their own that make the life of a predator not as easy as it seems.



Photo courtesy Joe Kozlany

Like predators, prey animals also have excellent senses of hearing, sight, and smell. Many large prey animals like deer and elk stick together in herds so there are more eyes, ears, and noses on the lookout for danger. Many prey animals are also well camouflaged and can easily hide from a hungry predator. Other prey animals are incredibly fast and can out-run a predator. And some prey animals have chemical defenses. One time meeting a skunk is usually enough to convince most predators that this is one animal that should always be left alone. Hooves, horns, teeth, and antlers are also weapons that predators want to avoid. A well-placed kick can badly injure or kill a predator.

While it sounds odd, predators and prey animals depend upon each other. Too many prey animals living in an area can eat all their food and then starve. Too many predators living in an area can eat all their prey, and then they too will starve and die. Healthy habitat allows both predators and prey to survive.

NATURE DETECTIVES---WILDLIFE BIOLOGISTS AT WORK

Many of the animals that wildlife biologists study are fairly easy to find. Animals that are secretive, solitary, or live in extremely hot or cold places can be challenging to study. In Idaho, these animals include lynx, wolverine, and fisher. All three are secretive, solitary, and like living at higher elevations all year-round. Biologists know that these species are found in Idaho. Exactly how many of them live here and exactly where is a big unknown. To answer these basic questions and more complex ones, wildlife biologists have to become the Sherlock Holmes of the outdoors. They look for clues to unravel wildlife mysteries.

These clues are often signs of animal activity. This can include a place where an animal has dug a hole or climbed a tree. It also includes tracks, den sites, food caches, nests, and scat, which is a fancy word for animal poop. Studying poop may sound like the grossest thing ever, but a scat can provide important clues about the animal that left it. A scat that is full of bones and hair tells biologists that it belongs to a predator. A scat with lots of seeds was left by an herbivore. A scat that has some plants along with some hair could have been left by an omnivore like a bear. Believe it or not, the size and shape of the scat are also important clues. Winter is often the best time to look for scat and other clues.

Photo courtesy Brian Moser



Fish and Game wildlife biologist Joel Sauder is holding a fisher. The fisher will be released when it wakes up.

HAIR SNARES

Another way wildlife biologists find clues about the animals in a habitat is by setting a hair snare route. Like snow-track surveys, hair snare routes are set in the winter. The hair snare is basically made of strong cardboard folded into a 2-foot long triangle. Just inside are several brushes. Farther into the box is some bait, usually a piece of meat. Near the place where the hair snare is set, biologists put out something called a “flag” or scent lure. This is usually something really smelly that will attract the attention of an animal. When the animal smells the flag, it will usually investigate the hair snare and try to get the meat inside. When that happens, the animal rubs against the brushes and leaves behind some hair. Just a few strands of hair can be the best clues a biologist can get to solve a wildlife mystery.

The hair contains an important substance called DNA. DNA contains all sorts of information about living creatures. Your DNA makes you a boy or a girl. It is responsible for your eye color, how tall you will become, your blood type, and many other things. Your DNA makes you the unique human being that you are and not a chipmunk. And it makes a chipmunk a chipmunk and not you.

The hair in a hair snare can give biologists the same kind of information about the animal that left the hair. It will tell exactly what kind of animal the hair came from. It will also tell if the animal was a male or a female. The DNA can even give an exact genetic (ja-NET-tick) description of the animal. Biologists keep this description so if the animal goes into another hair snare, they can tell if it is the same animal or a new animal. The information from hair snares has told biologists a lot about lynx, wolverine, and fisher in Idaho.

Can you see the brushes on this Hair Snare?



Photo courtesy Beth Waterbury

SNOW-TRACKING

One of the best parts of winter is getting to see animal tracks in the snow. Sometimes it is amazing to see all the different tracks running in every direction. These tracks are important clues to tell biologists about the animals that live in a certain area.

Biologists set up snow-track survey routes in habitats they think lynx, wolverine or fisher might live. These routes are about 16 miles long, and biologists travel them three times each winter. They might travel by snow machine, skis, or snowshoes. Sometimes they use all three depending upon what they find on their survey. When they travel along the route, the biologists watch for animal tracks and scat in the snow. If they find tracks, they identify the animal that left the tracks by taking careful measurements and photographs. This is really important if the track is not familiar. They look at the shape of the track, count the number of toes, and note if the animal was walking, trotting or running when it made the track. Some tracks are easy to identify and others are not. If they find the track of a lynx, wolverine, or fisher, the biologists will “back-track” the animal by following the tracks in the direction where the animal came from.

By back-tracking, biologists may be able to find out what the animal was doing. This is important information that can tell the biologists if the animal is living in the habitat or just passing through.

A blue grouse made this track in the snow.



Fish and Game biologist Dane Cook measures American Marten tracks in the snow. What can he learn from these measurements?

Photos courtesy Beth Waterbury

BE OUTSIDE!



Now that you know how wildlife biologists study wildlife in winter, it is your turn to become a wildlife detective. The best time to do your detective work is right after a snowfall. Dress warmly and head outside to see what tracks you can find in your yard. If you live near a park, nature center, or wildlife area ask your parents if you can go there to look for tracks. Bring some tools to help you learn about the tracks you see. Good things to bring include a tape measure or ruler, a pencil and a small notebook to record your observations and draw the track. If you have a digital camera bring that too so you can take pictures.

When you find some tracks, see if you can tell if the animal was walking, trotting, or running. How big are the tracks? Are they bigger than your hand or smaller? Do they have claw marks? How many toes can you count on each track? Do some back-tracking to see if you can tell what the animal was doing. Look for signs of what it was eating. See if you can find its resting spot.

If you do not know what kind of tracks you have found, find a book about animal tracks in your school library or go on-line to see what information you can find. The Idaho Department of Fish and Game has a free poster of animal tracks that you can get at the regional offices. Spending time outside tracking wildlife can tell you a lot about the wildlife in your neighborhood. Before you know it, you will be an expert wildlife detective!



CAN YOU IDENTIFY THESE TRACKS?

Raccoon
Deer Mouse
Red Squirrel
Coyote
Black Bear
Red Fox



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WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU !

If you have a letter, poem or question for *Wildlife Express*, it may be included in a future issue! Send it to the address printed above!