

Wildlife Express!

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IDFG Photo



The Gray Ghost



Some people say there are ghosts in northern forests. Their gray bodies dart through the forest with just the slightest ruffle in the air. These “ghosts of the forest” are not supernatural beings; they are Canada lynx. Canada lynx have a gray colored coat which helps them disappear in forest shadows. They also have large, furry feet which let them walk almost silently.

Canada lynx are rare in Idaho. They live in our northern forests and along the Montana and Wyoming borders. They prefer dense forests with many bushes and fallen logs. The thick brush helps them to hide. They avoid large open areas, but do hunt along the edges of open areas that are close to dense cover.

Lynx are made for living in a snowy forest. They have large, wide, furry feet. Their feet act like snowshoes helping them walk on top of the snow. Lynx also have fairly long legs to move through snow with ease. They have a fine, thick fur to protect them from bitter mountain temperatures. Lynx are known for having long ear tufts at the tip of their ears. Some scientists believe that the ear tufts may help lynx to hear. If you have ever cross-country skied through a thick forest, you will know that sounds are sometimes softened by the snow and trees. The tufts of fur on a lynx’s ears may amplify sound, helping the lynx to hear danger or hear its prey.

Snowshoe hares are a lynx’s favorite food. They eat more snowshoe hares than anything else, especially in the winter. Lynx may also eat red squirrels, birds, mice, or carrion (dead animals). Lynx are so dependent on snowshoe hares that the number of lynx there are depends on the number of snowshoe hares. When the number of snowshoe hares goes up, the number of lynx also goes up. When snowshoe hare numbers are low, lynx pregnancies drop and not as many kittens will survive.

Lynx breed in March or April. Usually three or four kittens are born 62 to 74 days later in a den. Lynx make their dens in hollow trees, under stumps, or in thick brush. Newborn kittens are tiny, blind and almost helpless. They drink only their mother’s milk until they are about one month old. Then the mother will bring them meat to eat. At first they only sniff and play with the meat, but it doesn’t take them long to learn to eat. When about three months old, the kittens are fully weaned and only eat meat. Kittens learn to hunt by watching and copying their mother. The young usually stay with their mother until the next breeding season. If they eat well and survive, lynx may grow to be 18 to 25 pounds.

Finding lynx is difficult; they are secretive and solitary animals. If you see the “gray ghost,” consider yourself lucky. Seeing them in the wild is a rare treat!

Hunt ... or be Hunted

When you hear the word “predator,” do you think of a large, snarling animal with long claws? The word predator may bring images to your mind of huge teeth dripping with saliva and frightful feelings. Are these images and negative feelings really accurate?

A predator is any animal that kills and eats another animal to survive. This can mean an animal as tiny as a spider or as large as a whale. Predators come in many different sizes and shapes. Canada lynx and wolves are predators. Trout, ladybugs and robins are predators, too. If an animal eats another animal, then it’s a predator.

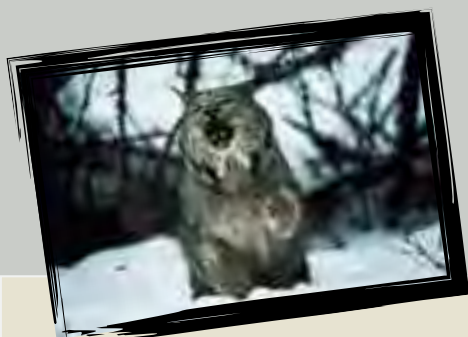
Being a predator is not as easy as it sounds. Animals that are hunted and eaten by other animals are called prey. Prey animals do not want to be a predator’s meal. They have ways to avoid being caught. Prey often have large ears to hear predators sneaking up on them. Many prey can explode away from a predator with great speed. Some even look like rocks or trees. Camouflage is a great way to avoid being eaten by a predator. Predators have to overcome all of a prey animal’s tricks to catch the animal. While predators are chasing their dinner, the prey might try to kick, bite, or sting them.

Nine times out of ten, the predator will not catch its prey. The predator will go hungry. Life as a predator is not easy!

Predators are important parts of the ecosystem.

They help maintain the balance of nature. Could you imagine how many mice there would be if we didn’t have red foxes or hawks to eat them? We might be overrun with mice and other pests eating our crops. Often predators eat sick and unhealthy animals. Removing unhealthy members from a herd helps to keep the whole herd healthy and strong.

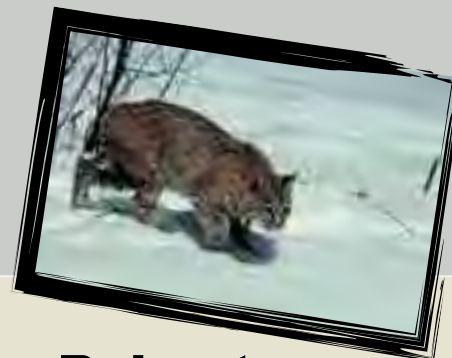
Predators may sometimes be seen as vicious or bloodthirsty, but is this accurate? Predators kill for one reason – to survive. Our world would be a different place with no predators.



Lynx

- Usually mixed shades of gray or yellowish-tan in color
- Long ear tufts
- Large tufts of fur on cheeks outlined in black
- Solid black tip on tail
- Long legs and large feet

Bobcat or Lynx?



Bobcat

- Brown in color with black spots or bars on belly and sometimes on legs and body
- Small ear tufts and white spot on back of ear
- Tail with dark bars on top and white on bottom
- Short legs and small feet

Name Game

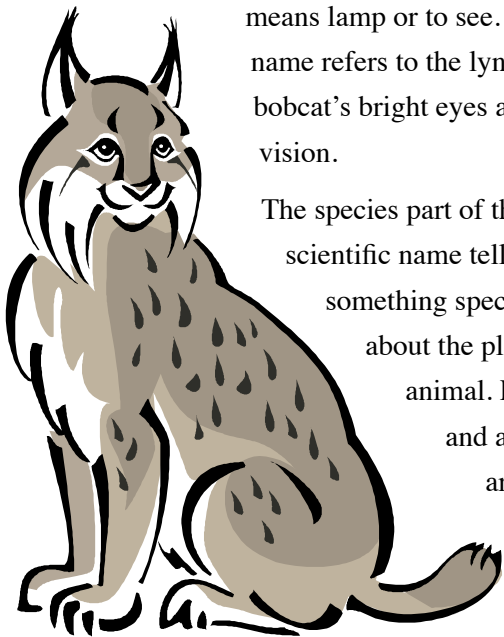
Everything has a name. You do. You have a first name and a last name. Most people also have a middle name.

Animals and plants also have two names. They have a common name and a scientific name. The common name is the name most people use when talking about the animal, such as lynx. The scientific name is usually in Greek or Latin and is made up of two words. The first word is the genus name. The second part is called the species name. Sometimes the scientific name has three parts – the genus, the species and the subspecies. The Idaho ground squirrel has two subspecies the northern and the southern. They are the same type of squirrel, but they are just a tiny bit different.

Have you ever wondered how animals and plants got their scientific names? The scientific name for the Canada lynx is *Lynx canadensis*. The first part of a scientific name tells us what genus an animal or plant is in. Plants and animals with the same genus name are closely related. Both the bobcat and lynx are in the genus *Lynx*. They have many things in common with each other; they are close cousins. *Lynx*

means lamp or to see. This name refers to the lynx's and bobcat's bright eyes and good vision.

The species part of the scientific name tells us something specific about the plant or animal. Plants and animals are usually given their



scientific names by the person that first discovered them and wrote about them. Sometimes animals are named after people. The white-tailed jackrabbit's scientific name is *Lepus townsendii*. It was named after J.K. Townsend. He was one of the first people that collected white-tailed jackrabbits. The lynx's species name is *canadensis*, which means of Canada. In North America, this is where most lynx are found.

Often animals and plants are named for some special features they have. The skunk's scientific name is *Mephitis mephitis*. This means bad odor, bad odor. That makes sense! The mountain lion's scientific name is *Puma concolor*. *Concolor* means one color. Mountain lions don't have any spots on their bodies when they are fully grown. Other wild cats in Idaho, bobcats and lynx, do have spots or markings on their bodies when they are fully grown.

Scientific names can tell us a lot about animals and plants. Next time you see a scientific name, do a little research and find out what the name means. You might be surprised by what you find out!

Threatened, Endangered, Extirpated ... What Does It All Mean?

Have you ever heard someone say that an animal is threatened or endangered? How about extirpated (EKS-tir-pated) or extinct? What do all these terms mean?

Scientists use these terms to describe how a wildlife species may be doing. A species that is threatened is usually becoming harder to find. The Canada lynx is a threatened species in Idaho. An animal may be listed as endangered if its numbers continue to drop.

If someone says a species is endangered, that means the species is in danger of becoming extinct. These animals are really in trouble. The species will probably not survive unless people help it. The peregrine falcon was once listed as endangered. In 1970, there were only 40 pairs of peregrine falcons nesting in the United States. People stepped in and started raising falcons in captivity and releasing them back into the wild. The program was so

successful that the peregrine falcon was taken off the endangered species list and is now only threatened.

Animals that are extirpated are missing from an area where they used to be found, but they are still found living in other areas. Caribou are extirpated from Britain. At one time, caribou lived on the British Islands. Does that mean they are extinct? No, because caribou are still found living in other parts of the world.

Extinct animals are animals that no longer exist. They cannot be found anywhere on the planet. Passenger pigeons, heath hens and dinosaurs are examples of extinct animals.

Now you know what it means if someone says an animal is threatened, endangered, extirpated or extinct.



Photos courtesy Multi-species Baseline Initiative, IDFG

Wild Cats



Do you have a pet cat at home? Cats have been companions to people for a long time. Ancient Egyptians worshipped cats. Farmers have traditionally kept cats to protect grain from mice. Cats appear in many of our favorite stories or cartoons like *The Cat in the Hat* and *Garfield*. Cats have been a part of our lives for so long that we forget our pets were domesticated from small wild cats.

Worldwide there are 35 species of wild cats. In North America, there are three species. Idaho has all three living in our state – the mountain lion, lynx and bobcat.

All cats, even a pet tabby, are made to hunt. They have special adaptations that make them some of the best hunters around. Cats rely on a combination of vision, hearing and smell to find their prey. Most cats hunt at night. They have large eyes and sharp vision. During the day, cats can see as well as humans; but at night, their vision is six times more sensitive! Cats have a

special membrane in their eye that catches light. The glow you see when light hits a cat's eye at night is this membrane reflecting the light around the cat's eye. Smaller cats can hear high-pitched sounds humans cannot. Their ears help them locate rodents and insects that use these high-pitched sounds to communicate.

Once a cat has located its prey, it sneaks up on the prey. The cat crouches low to the ground and quickly moves toward the prey, then freezes. It waits for the best time then pounces. Cats have long canine teeth that are made to cut the prey's spinal cord or windpipe. The cat's short muzzle allows it to breathe while biting and subduing its prey. The hunt is over quickly when the cat gets a good hold.

Have you ever heard the saying, "A cat always lands on its feet."? Cats have an amazing sense of balance. They can climb trees and leap and twist through the air. They have a special structure in their inner ears that helps them balance and sense which way is up. When a cat is bending through the air, the inner ear guides the head and neck into a horizontal position. The rest of the body follows the head and neck, and soon the cat is standing on its feet.

If you or a friend has a cat, watch it around the house. Dangle a string in front of the cat or throw a toy mouse by it. You may see some wild hunting skills shine through your pet.



Be Outside: Stargazing

If you find yourself far away from city lights looking for gray ghosts, you might want to look up. You will not find a gray ghost in the sky, but you may see other ghostly figures. Winter is a wonderful time to do some stargazing.

Night objects are actually easier to see on a cold, clear night. Dress warmly, bring a pair of binoculars and grab an adult. Then head out to look for these heavenly objects in January:

The Moon: The moon becomes full on January 27. A moon that is becoming full is called a “waxing” moon. Once the full moon has passed, it is a “waning” moon. As the moon wanes, it becomes less and less visible in the night sky. Watch the different phases of the moon as it waxes and wanes during the month.

Winter Constellations: Use a starchart for January to find the constellations of Orion, Taurus, Gemini, Cassiopeia, Pegasus, Big Dipper or Ursa Major, and Little Dipper or Ursa Minor. Orion is a large rectangular constellation. It is also called “The Hunter.” Orion is easily found by looking for three stars lined up together that form Orion’s Belt. Several stars make up Orion’s shoulders. Betelgeuse (beetle juice) is the very bright star on the northeast corner of the constellation. It is one of the brightest and largest stars in the night sky. It is 1,000 times bigger than our Sun!



BE OUTSIDE
IDAHO CHILDREN IN NATURE

Meteor Showers: Meteor showers are created when the Earth passes through the orbit of a comet. Comets are just like large dirty snowballs. When they melt and turn to a gas, they leave behind a path of space dust. The Earth’s gravity pulls the meteoroids, or dust, into our atmosphere, causing many more “shooting stars” or meteors. The best time to see these is after midnight since this is when “our” side of the Earth is racing through the path of space dust. January 3rd is the peak of the Quadrantid Meteor Shower. To find it, look toward the north near Polaris, the North Star, and east toward the Big Dipper (Ursa Major). You may see as many as 40 meteors per hour.

Lynx Lingo

BALANCE
 CANINE TEETH
 EAR TUFTS
 FOREST
 FURRY FEET
 GHOST
 GOOD HEARING
 GRAY
 GREAT VISION
 PREDATOR
 SECRETIVE
 SNOWSHOE HARE
 SOLITARY
 THREATENED

N C W S G H I F D S G E M D G
 R A D G D W B B G K E W T O K
 S N O W S H O E H A R E O W A
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