

Bobcats in my backyard...

By Dave Falkenham, UNHCE Grafton County Forester

Recently there have been a healthy number of backyard bobcat sightings here in Grafton County and some people have been lucky enough to get pictures. Contrary to popular belief, bobcats are quite common in New Hampshire thus a sighting, although rare and exciting, is not entirely unusual. The recent rash of sightings is seasonal and likely related to food (or lack thereof) and the time of year.



Bobcats are extremely efficient and fierce predators, feeding almost exclusively on rabbits and other small mammals. However, survival in the wild is no place for picky eaters so Bobcats commonly supplement their diets with grasshoppers, crickets, frogs, ducks, fish, birds, berries, fruit, and grasses. During the spring, summer and fall these food sources are plentiful so a full grown male bobcat typically has a summer range of up to 25 square miles. The female's territory is much smaller because she is busy raising 1-8 kittens who can't travel as far.

During the winter months many foods are not available; therefore bobcats must survive on mostly rabbits, squirrels, carrion and the occasional deer (yes bobcats commonly prey on deer). With the scarcer food supplies comes a search for food that requires more roaming and the bobcat's range increases dramatically, sometimes up to 60 square miles. The kittens, which were born in April or May are almost independent and can now travel greater distances with their mothers.

With an increased winter range and a more intense search for food, the likelihood of actually seeing a bobcat increases, thus so do photographic opportunities. Anybody who raises small farm animals or free range pets is offering a ranging bobcat an easy meal. On the bright side, these folks have an increased chance of seeing our most elusive large predator.

Another reason for common winter sightings is that the breeding season for bobcats is in February. The breeding season for any polygamous animal increases wandering and the potential for sightings increases as well. Many of the cats that people see this time of year are big males looking for a mate or a pair of cats (if you are lucky enough).

Bobcats, similar to our free range domestic cats, are very territorial and they do not like to share their toys with any other cats. Territories are marked by pungent scent spraying through urination and anybody who happens across a scent marking in the forest will know it; the smell is unmistakably cat-like.

Bobcats typically grow to be about 25-30 pounds and 40 pounds is huge, but not out of the question. Despite their typical antisocial behavior, bobcats are a vocal animal, communicating most commonly during the breeding season. Cat-like piercing screams and a coughing bark are common sounds that can be heard in the forest at night.

Bobcats do swim. To date my most memorable wildlife moment was to watch a full grown bobcat launch itself off a beaver lodge and belly flop into a pond. It then proceeded to swim 70 yards to shore where it shook like a dog and disappeared into the woods. The best part of the experience was that my wife was with me and also fully witnessed this event.

Bobcats are unmistakable; tawny colored, lots of black/brown spots, white underbellies, short tails (3-6 inches long), short tufts on the ends of their ears and very muscular with a tough business-like

attitude. They are magnificent animals with a keen predatory presence and they are cat-like in every sense of the word. If you spot one, enjoy the moment.

