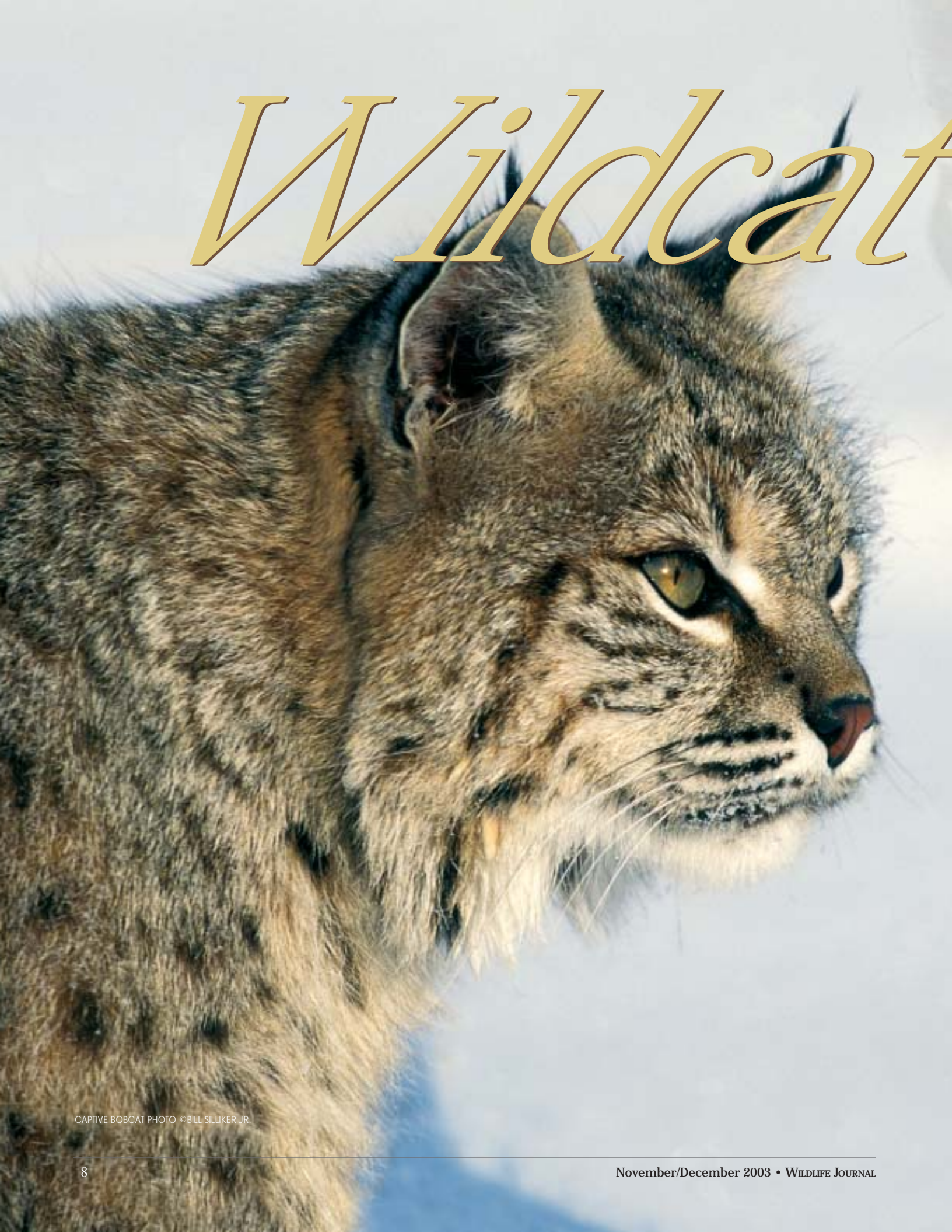


Wildcat



CAPTIVE BOBCAT PHOTO ©BILL SILLIKER JR.

Country

WILL NEW HAMPSHIRE'S BOBCATS SURVIVE?

BY JANE VACHON

A solitary feline stretches its lithe frame and grooms its thick reddish-brown fur, warm with gray overtones and dark dappled spots. It rises from a sunny ledge, high on a mountainside, and stalks off in search of a snowshoe hare. Its short tail and ruff of facial fur would tell a lucky observer that this is no ordinary cat, but New Hampshire's wild predatory feline, the bobcat.

THE LAST WILDCAT

The bobcat is the last survivor of three wildcats that once roamed the New Hampshire woods. Mountain lions (also called cougars, panthers or catamounts) were essentially gone by the late 1800s. The bobcat's taller cousin, the lynx, lived in northern New Hampshire through the 1950s; no breeding population of lynx now survives in the state. Only the tenacious bobcat is still here.

Secretive and shy, bobcats are rarely seen. No one knows for sure, but probably several hundred still live in the Granite State. The southwestern corner of the state has the most consistent reports of bobcat sightings, according to Fish

and Game Wildlife Biologist Eric Orff. "I've never seen one in the woods in my life," admits Orff. "It's a rare thing to see a bobcat. It should be enjoyed."

BOBCAT BOUNTY

New Hampshire is on the northern edge of the bobcat's range. Other northern populations live in New York, Vermont and Maine, all of which continue to have bobcat hunting and trapping seasons. Thriving populations also exist in more southern states from coast to coast.

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For nearly two centuries, bobcats were killed for bounty in New Hampshire. Settlers first put a price on the cat's head in 1809 because it competed for game and raided livestock. Bobcat bounties did not end until 1973. By the late 1970s, bobcats had become scarce in the state, and only a few were hunted and trapped through the 1980s in a very limited annual season. New Hampshire's hunting and trapping seasons for bobcat were finally closed in 1989. In just over a decade, bobcats had gone from being hunted in New Hampshire to being completely protected.

Since the bobcat's natural enemies, the wolf and cougar, are no longer found in New Hampshire, and hunting and trapping are no longer factors, why aren't bobcats rebounding faster?

DWINDLING PREY

The bobcat population in New Hampshire has increased since that time, but it hasn't taken off. "Statewide, bobcats are still a relatively uncommon animal, even after 20 years of protection," said John Litvaitis, Professor of Wildlife Ecology at the University of New Hampshire.

Since the bobcat's natural enemies, the wolf and cougar, are no longer found in New Hampshire, and hunting and trapping are no longer factors, why aren't bobcats rebounding faster? According to Litvaitis, the state's bobcats now face different challenges. Fishers and an adaptable new predator, the coyote, compete with bobcats for a dwindling prey pool, and encroaching development breaks up the large blocks of habitat bobcats need. Humans also have ushered in another dangerous element: busy roads that can be deadly for the wide-ranging animals. "Habitat, including prey abundance and road densities, is a key factor influencing current and future abundance of bobcats in New Hampshire," Litvaitis said.

SOLITARY LIFESTYLE

Part of the problem is that bobcats are loners. Their only real social grouping is females with kittens — usually about 3 to a litter, dependent on their mothers for 9 or 10 months. This solitary lifestyle means bobcats need space, and lots of it. Females stake out a territory of about 12 square miles, and males roam over 36 square miles, depending on the availability of food. The bobcat weighs just 15-30 pounds, but needs almost as much space as a black bear does to find the food it needs. Snowshoe hares and cottontail rabbits are the bobcat's favorite foods, though they also



will eat mice, chipmunks, wild turkeys and even an occasional deer. Being cats, they are strict carnivores. This puts them at a disadvantage when competing with coyotes, fishers and even foxes, which supplement their diets with apples and berries when meat is scarce, and don't mind eating carrion. Bobcats like their meals fresh.

Winter is an especially tough time for bobcats in New Hampshire. Food is scarce, and the bobcat's short legs and small feet aren't as well suited to hunting in deep snow as are the long, thin legs of coyotes. Driven by hunger during the cold months, bobcats sometimes gravitate to barns and porches in search of food, or stalk birds and squirrels at backyard feeders. Many young bobcats, as well as some adults, don't survive winters with periods of deep, fluffy snow.

LIFE ON THE LEDGE

Since bobcats are primarily dependent on hare and rabbit populations, their survival here is linked closely to efforts to preserve land with dense, brushy tangles, softwood cover and a mix of younger and older trees. "How far bobcats have to travel depends on the lagomorph population — the order containing rabbits and hares," says Meade Cadot, Director of the Harris Center for Conservation Education in Hancock and a core faculty member at Antioch New England. "What that means is that we have to protect large blocks of land with good hare habitat and connections to other protected parcels."

Bobcats often roam between brushy swamp areas and the high elevation habitat they prefer. Rocky, south-facing slopes and near-summit ledges of mountains offer the bobcat protection, a safe place to raise kittens and a chance to soak up



©BILL SULLIKER JR. PHOTO (CAPTIVE MODEL)

A secretive predator, the bobcat hunts alone, often crouching and waiting for prey near well-traveled game trails.

the sun. The Harris Center, in partnership with other organizations, has set up a “Super-sanctuary” in southwestern New Hampshire that so far has protected 8,000 acres within a larger matrix of 11,000 acres of conservation land. The Super-sanctuary includes four peaks over 2,000 feet in elevation, providing critical high mountain habitat for bobcat. “We went out of our way to buy some ledges on Osgood Mountain – a 108-acre piece of land with south-facing ledges. It’s especially important as winter habitat for bobcats,” Cadot said. “Fortunately, there’s still a lot of undeveloped habitat in the Monadnock region, but we have a limited window of time to preserve it.”

PROTECTING TRAVEL ROUTES

Across the state in southeastern New Hampshire, the Bear-Paw Regional Greenways group is working to protect the lands that connect Bear Brook and Pawtuckaway state parks, highlighting the need that resident wildlife have for travel routes between large areas of habitat. Sign of snowshoe hare and bobcat have been reported within the 1,000+ acres from Allentown to Nottingham protected to date by Bear-Paw.

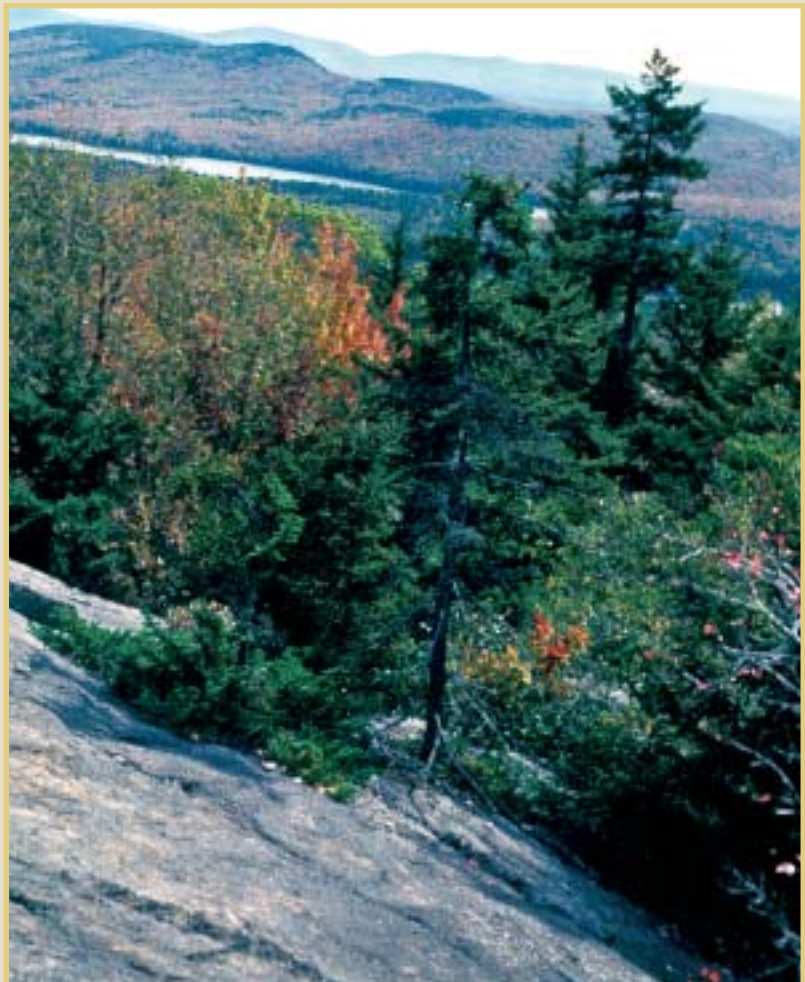
Frank Mitchell, a UNH Extension Specialist in Land and Water Conservation and one of Bear-Paw’s founding members, says such conservation efforts are critical for the survival of wide-ranging species like the bobcat. “While conserving blocks of land here and there is valuable, for these species it’s important not to have ‘islands’ of conservation land surrounded by development,” Mitchell said. “There may be enough land for the resident population to survive, but it can cut off opportunity for genetic exchange.”

IMPROVING THE OUTLOOK

John Lanier, a Habitat Biologist at N.H. Fish and Game, concurs that protecting unfragmented land is an excellent first step. “But locking the forest up and throwing away the key is not going to help the bobcat either,” he said. “What’s needed is to incorporate vegetative management strategies into the mix so that you can have predictable amounts of habitat over time.” Systematic cutting of trees, controlled burns and mowing old fields can create the browse and young trees needed to accommodate the hares that bobcats rely on for food, Lanier explains.

Ongoing efforts to conserve, connect and manage protected lands may give us the chance to share the shadowy sight of an elusive bobcat in the wild

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© MEADE CADOT PHOTO

Bobcats prefer rocky, south-facing slopes, like these sunny ledges high on Osgood Mountain in the Monadnock Region purchased by the Harris Center for Conservation Education. Additional protected land in the center’s Super-sanctuary stretches beyond.

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with future generations in New Hampshire. Fish and Game's work on a Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Plan for the state will help identify habitats that are most critical to species of concern. That plan, along with dozens of ambitious habitat protection and open-space initiatives by local land planners and conservation groups should improve the outlook for the regal bobcat and countless other species. As Lanier says, "If you're a bobcat, all of those things are going to help." 

For a list of groups in New Hampshire working to protect land and wildlife habitat, visit the Land Trust Alliance website at www.lta.org/findlandtrust/NH.htm.



© ROGER IRWIN PHOTO (CAPTIVE MODEL)

Winter can be a tough season for bobcats, which are on the northern edge of their habitat range in New Hampshire.

Trapper Alert

Bobcat ranges often overlap with that of other furbearers, so trappers must make every effort to avoid catching them. Trappers should check for bobcat signs in the areas they plan to trap and should not set traps where bobcats frequent. Leaning pole sets should be at least five feet off the ground. Trappers should never use visible baits of rabbits or hares in traps. They should use tainted meat in traps for foxes and coyotes — this bait is not as attractive to bobcats.

If a bobcat is caught accidentally, trappers must make every effort to release it unharmed at the catch site. All trappers need to carry a catchpole to allow the safe release of unintended captures. If you need assistance releasing a bobcat, call your local Conservation Officer for help.

BOBCAT OR LYNX?

If you spot a wildcat in New Hampshire these days, you can be almost certain it's a bobcat. People sometimes think they're seeing a lynx. That's not surprising, since the bobcat is a close relative of the Canada lynx — in fact, the bobcat's scientific name is *Lynx rufus*. But sightings are extremely rare; New Hampshire hasn't had a breeding population of lynx since the 1950s. About ten years ago, a lynx was killed on Interstate 89, but it was thought to be a visitor roaming from Canada or Maine. Here's a quick comparison of the two cats:

Size: Bobcats and lynx are about the same weight, though the lynx looks bigger because it has more dense fur and longer legs. They are twice the size of a domestic cat.

Fur features: Strikingly beautiful, lynx have telltale tufts of hair at the end of their ears, much longer than the bobcat's tiny tufts. The lynx has reddish to gray-brown fur, lighter on its underside, and is not as spotted as a bobcat. Bobcat fur is dense, short and soft. The tip of the lynx's tail is all black; the tip of the bobcat's tail is black only on the top and is white underneath.

Winter adaptability: Lynx are adapted to snow and winter weather, with longer legs, thick heavy fur and feet three times the size of a bobcat's. The lynx's broad paws serve as snowshoes, allowing it to move easily through deep snow. The bobcat's short legs and petite paws put it at a disadvantage in snow.



Canada lynx

Food: Lynx and bobcat both feed primarily on snowshoe hares.

Behavior: Both lynx and bobcats are solitary animals, associating only briefly during the mating season, and are mainly nocturnal. Both raise kittens in a sheltered place among rocks or under a fallen tree. Bobcats are more aggressive.

Protection: The Canada lynx is designated a federally threatened species in the contiguous U.S.; it is illegal to hunt or trap lynx anywhere in the country except Alaska. Bobcats do not have this designation. Bobcats are not hunted or trapped in New Hampshire, but several other states do have active hunting and trapping seasons for bobcat.

Range: Lynx range across Canada and Alaska. Maine is the only northeastern state with a breeding population of lynx; in the western U.S., there are populations of lynx in Montana and Washington. Bobcats are found in New Hampshire, Vermont, Maine, New York and Pennsylvania, as well as in the southern U.S. from Georgia to California.

Tracks: One of the most distinctive differences between bobcats and lynx is their tracks. Bobcat tracks are small — around two inches across — and very well defined. Lynx tracks, made by their "bottlebrush" feet, are four inches across and leave no suggestion of toes in the snow. 