



The Adaptable Bobcat

article and photos by MICHAEL TEWES

Bobcats (*Lynx rufus*) are among the most highly effective predators in the animal kingdom. Being a wild cat places them in the upper echelon of elite predators, and their wide range and abundance further reflects their success as natural assassins.

Bobcat distribution spans from Mexico City to the southern portion of most Canadian provinces. It avoids the deep snow country of northern Canada, where its close cousin, the lynx (*Lynx canadensis*), with long legs and wide furry paws, has competitive advantage over it. Bobcats occur in almost every county of Texas and in almost every state in the United States.

The short, dense fur of the bobcat varies considerably from dull white, gray, and yellow in some individuals, with varying decorations of black spots to no spots. A small percentage of bobcats display beautiful rosettes aligned in rows or chains on their stunning coats. Even black bobcats have been photographed in Florida.

Working at the Feline Research Center of the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute, my graduate students and I have spent a good part of the past 30 years studying these stealthy predators in Texas. Over this period, we have learned to greatly appreciate the ability of bobcats to survive in many difficult and different environments.

Ecological flexibility enables bobcats to thrive in diverse habitats, including swamps, grasslands, woodlands, forests, edges of agricultural fields, and urban fringes. They easily make their home in the pine forests of East Texas to the mountains of West Texas and in most rangeland, in between.

Generally, bobcats prefer some level of cover in these disparate habitat types, and

they usually place their dens in locations within their territory where dense vegetation or tangling woody debris provide exceptional concealment. Some of the highest densities of bobcats in the United States occur in the Brush Country of South Texas, where a cornucopia of prey provides a great bounty when there is plenty of rainfall.



Dr. Terry Blankenship, Director of the Rob and Bessie Welder Wildlife Refuge, has spent much of his professional career studying the ecology of bobcats. His early research found bobcat reproduction peaked in March and April, with some females producing young almost any month of the year. The relatively milder climate of Texas permits this broad breeding season, compared to that of the northern states.

Bobcats typically produce two or three young in a litter. These kittens are born with eyes closed and are totally dependent on their mother who, in turn, is dependent on the abundance of prey. Extended drought can deplete prey populations, which can translate to poorer survival of bobcats.

Dr. Blankenship found that bobcats can

exhibit considerable ecological plasticity in their use of prey. When abundant, bobcats rely on cotton rats and rabbits. However, they can switch to smaller rodents, gophers, and birds, occasionally patrolling the edges of ponds and lakes in search of waterbirds, if the preferred menu declines.

You have probably seen a stuffed bobcat swatting at a suspended quail in various outdoor stores and office corners. Although I believe some of these displays are created with skill by excellent taxidermist, and are aesthetically pleasing at least to me, I am amused at how it really represents an uncommon event in nature.

Bobcats are not major predators of quail. We reviewed 54 different food studies of bobcats conducted over several decades from throughout their range in North America, and we found birds were a minor part of their diet. Of this extensive list, there were only two studies that found noteworthy levels of quail remains. One study by Dave Maehr in Florida found 6 percent of 413 bobcat stomachs had quail. The other instance was a South Texas study by former TWA Vice President Dr. Sam Beasom in 1977, which found 6 percent of 125 bobcat stomachs contained quail feathers and bones.

Although bobcats are not on par with coyotes, both kill new deer fawns in early summer. Though uncommon in Texas, adult bobcats are capable of providing a lethal blow even to adult deer. Adult deer are an important part of some bobcat diets in the northeastern United States.

These lethal felines are successful predators in many places and under many conditions, thereby earning the admiration of biologists and wildlife enthusiasts. 🐾

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