

NATURE DETECTIVES



Catching Bobcats

Do you wonder how scientists study wild animals? Michelle is a wildlife biologist who assisted researchers studying Colorado bobcats. For one part of this study, the research team needed to catch a few live bobcats. She will tell you that catching a bobcat is hard work.

You have to hike a long way carrying heavy bobcat traps on your shoulders. These cages are sized for a bobcat, purposely too small for a mountain lion to enter. Nevertheless, at one trap a petite and very curious mountain lion managed to squeeze inside. Oh, dear...it is not easy to get an upset cougar, even a small one, out of a bobcat trap.

Traps can attract other animals such as squirrels, rabbits and foxes too. And skunks! Michelle was sprayed twice while releasing unhappy skunks.

Collaring a Wildcat

Whenever any critter tripped the trap door, Michelle would get a radio signal. Right away, she would hike in to check the trap so no animal would be caged long. If a bobcat gazed out of the trap at her, it was time for the research team to jump into action.

After laying out all their supplies, they carefully give the bobcat a shot to make it sleep for 30 minutes. They ease the cat out of the trap and lay it on a soft blanket to help keep it warm and comfortable. They even put little eye shades on the wildcat to keep the sun out of its eyes. While the cat is dozing they take blood samples to check for disease. If a flea leaps out of the fur they try to snatch it for later identification. A radio collar is slipped on so they can study where the bobcat travels.

Wake Up Kitty

The cat is put gently back into the open cage, now with a blanket over the top. While the cat sleeps, the researchers clear a kitty escape path so nothing can injure the cat as it wakes up and makes a mad dash to freedom.



Seeing Spots

Bobcats are about twice the size of a pet house cat, but individual bobcats vary in size and mottled color.

Michelle said she noticed how big one looked as he stared into her eyes from inside the trap. His eyes looked big, the ruffs of long fur at his cheeks looked big, even his nose looked big.

Some bobcats have large dark blotches and others have pale spots that hardly show at all. The spot patterns are so distinctive, researchers can identify individual cats in photos by the boldness, shape and placement of the spots and streaks.

The color of the wildcats is perfect camouflage for the brushy or rocky areas they usually inhabit. Even a bobcat sunning itself in the open on a rocky ledge is seldom noticed. That camouflage helps make them effective hunters.

Hunting Quietly on Tiptoe

Bobcats need to eat meat. They are skilled predators, taught to hunt by their moms. She taught them to crouch along a path used by rodents or rabbits. Hidden in the brush, listening and watching, they will wait patiently for the chance to ambush their unsuspecting prey.

Bobcat hearts are not designed for long running chases so wildcats are experts at surprise attack. Cats walk on their toes. They carefully place their feet to avoid noise as they sneak through the underbrush or around rocks. The soft pads on the bottoms of their feet dampen the sounds of their footsteps even further. They quietly stalk an unaware mouse or rabbit then suddenly pounce when their prey is just a short dash away.

Rabbits are bobcats' favorite food. One rabbit is enough food for a whole day. Researchers sometimes use road kill rabbits to bait their bobcat traps.

Bobcats also eat birds, rodents such as mice and voles, sometimes snakes, frogs or lizards and even insects like grasshoppers. Their honed, curved claws lock onto their prey. To protect their eyes, they close them and use their sensitive whiskers to guide their sharp-toothed bite. Their round face shape gives their jaws the strength to bite hard for a quick kill.

No one worries about bobcats attacking humans, not even little kids. They just don't.

Trap Safety

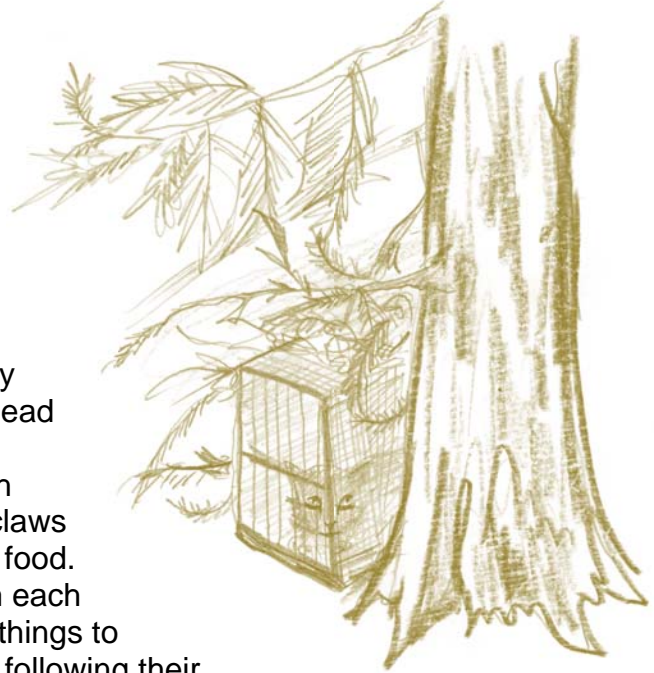
Bobcat researchers are careful about when they catch bobcats for their study. They only put out traps when bears are hibernating so bears won't harm any caged animals. They also avoid trapping when bobcat moms are likely to have kittens.

No biologist wants to keep a wildcat from her kittens for even a short amount of time.

Playful Kitties

Bobcat moms often den under a fallen log or in an opening under a pile of rocks. They like the south side of a hill where the sun will provide a warm nursery for the kittens. Usually a bobcat mom will have three kittens around May.

Much like a pet tabby cat, bobcats seem to enjoy play. Even adult cats have been seen flinging dead prey or feathers into the air in a game of catch. Kittens play rough, stalking and jumping on each other, clawing and biting. They are using their claws and teeth in ways they will use them later to get food. It is good practice. The kittens don't really harm each other because their killing bite is one of the last things to develop. When they are old enough, they start following their mom when she goes hunting. White spots on the backs of her ears and tail help the kittens keep her in sight at night.



Curiosity and a playful nature are what help biologists trap bobcats. Even though traps are disguised with twigs and leaves, clever bobcats tend to be wary of entering. A few turkey feathers swinging in the breeze can tempt a playful bobcat to ignore its sense of caution. Some bobcats are even lured into a trap by stuffed toy rabbits and catnip. The traps are checked every day to make sure the bait or "cat toys" are still there and the traps are well concealed with brush.

Bobcat or Lynx

Bobcats avoid snow. Their footprints up on logs show how they dodge drifts. Since they don't like deep snow or cold, they don't live high in the mountains. Bobcats hang out where they can find good bushy or rocky areas for hiding and hunting.

Lynx look similar to bobcats but are a different cat species just as cougars are a different cat species. Lynx thrive in deep snow where their huge, furry feet allow them to move fast on top of the snow crust. Lynx pick forested areas high in the mountains for their homes.

Bobcats are gray, tan and rusty brown. Some are more grayish than others. Their "bobbed" tails are about 6 inches long, with black spots on top. The tail tip is black on top and white underneath. Lynx are gray with pale spots. Their tail tips are black all around.

Looking for Signs of Bobcats

How many bobcats live in Boulder County? Since the cats are experts at sneaking around without anyone seeing them, no one is sure. Researchers may have a better estimate of bobcat numbers from their study results.



Like a biologist, you might have fun looking for signs of bobcats in natural areas where wildlife live. Bobcats especially seem to travel along ridgelines and overlooks or edges. They often travel on easy paths like trails, dirt roads and beside irrigation ditches. Look for bobcat sign in these kinds of places.

Bobcats leave different signs to mark their territories and communicate with other bobcats in the area. The wildcats see and smell these signs. Signs include scat (poop) and scrapes (where the cat scraped the dirt around scat piles or scraped leaves into a pile to spray with

urine). Bobcats leave claw marks on logs and trees, and tracks in mud or snow.

Bobcat paw prints are round shaped. Their tracks seldom show claw marks since cats retract their claws when they aren't using them. This keeps their claws sharp. Dog family members leave more oval shaped prints and their non-retractable claw marks usually do show in the track.

Your Bobcat

Color this bobcat the way you'd like it to look. Does your bobcat have dark spots and streaks or faint spots? Does your bobcat have more reddish brown fur or more light gray fur?

