

## **The Bobcats of Four Hills Village and New Mexico**

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We meet them in the early mornings, often see them in the gloaming of the sunset, and frequently film them on our night trail cameras. These solitary, stealthy, and intelligent hunters have been residents of our rocky, juniper-studded neighborhood hills for thousands of years. The bobcat (*Lynx rufus*), also called “red lynx” or “wildcat”, is the most successful wild cat species in North America. It can be found in every county and in every biological habitat of New Mexico. Survivors of the ice ages, their range extends from northern Mexico to southern Canada.

The bobcat is the smallest of the North American wild cats, usually described as about twice the size of a domestic housecat (unless you are owned by a Maine Coon cat which is about the same size as a bobcat). Generally, a mature adult will weigh 12-40 pounds, although there have been reports of larger bobcats reaching weights of up to 60 pounds. On average, these stocky, muscular cats are 25-41 inches in length and stand about 21 inches tall. Their hind legs are a little longer than their front legs and their feet, with retractable claws, are small, typically, about 1.5 inches long and 2.5 inches wide. Their thick fur and relatively high shoulder height can make them look much larger than they actually are.



(Picture 1- Walking female bobcat in Four Hills Village. Photo by Steve Brugge, 2018)

A bobcat’s compact body is covered with a soft, dense coat of fur that ranges in color from light grey to reddish brown. Locally, our bobcats tend to sport reddish gold to light brown colors. Their coats are

randomly barred and spotted with black or dark reddish-brown markings, particularly across the face and legs. The fur along the back is usually a darker shade while their spotted bellies and chins tend to be whitish. These 'cats get their common name from their very short or "bobbed" tails which are generally 3-7 inches in length. The tail is marked with several indistinct darker bands and tipped in black, but only on the topside. The bottom side of the tail is white. The bobcat's other distinctive physical characteristics are its long downward-curving cheek ruffs (almost like a Victorian age gentleman's sideburns) and their large upright and tufted triangular ears. The ears are black on the outside with a white central spot. Bobcats have large, round, forward-facing eyes that are yellowish-brown in color and well adapted for day or night sight hunting.



(Picture 2 - Adult bobcat in Four Hills Village. Photo by Steve Brugge, 2021)

(Picture 3 – A Victorian gentleman, Thomas Henry Huxley. Photo by Bassano, 1883)

According to the International Society for Endangered Cats, Canada, (2021):

“These tough little cats survive mainly because they are secretive, cantankerous, will eat almost any type of prey and can live in almost any kind of habitat. Like their close relative, the Canadian Lynx, they prey primarily on rabbits, but are less of a specialist.”

Bobcats are Olympic-quality sprinters, having been clocked at over 30 mph. They can easily climb trees to escape danger or rob nests. They swim well, enabling them to capture aquatic fare. They also can leap across surprisingly large distances, over 12 feet in a single bound. Bobcats will hunt day or night, but generally prefer dusk or dawn, when their favored prey, rabbits, are most active. They are opportunistic feeders and will prey on whatever is most abundant. Their style of hunting is more one of stealth than pursuit. A bobcat may wait by a game trail or in some other advantageous spot and then pounce, or make a short quick rush, to capture its dinner when it happens along. Their diet most often consists of small animals, rabbits being most favored, but, other rodents, birds, reptiles, and even occasional insects will fill in the menu. Small pets, including cats and dogs, have fallen prey to these aggressive hunters when their favored foods become scarce.



(Picture 4- “It only took just one pounce” adult bobcat with captured bullsnake, Four Hills Village. Photo by Ann Harris-Davidson, 2021)

Surprisingly, these small, skilled hunters have been observed to be effective predators of white-tailed deer, an animal that can be more than 10 times their body weight. Although they typically will focus on fawns, bobcats will hunt adult deer. When hunting an adult deer, a bobcat will usually take a resting deer with a strangling neck bite that is very similar to that used by lions. Bobcats have also been observed to pounce from tree limb perches and kill unwary adult deer passing under them. In the case of successfully killing larger prey, bobcats will often cover or bury the uneaten remains for future meals. This activity is known as “caching” and is also practiced by our local mountain lions.

A bobcat’s established hunting range can vary from a square mile to several tens of square miles. The female’s range is usually smaller than that of a male. A male bobcat’s range will typically overlap that of several females and can partially overlap with another male’s territory. Young females will often settle near or even within their mother’s range, while young males disperse and may travel long distances to establish their own range in an unoccupied area. Unlike other wild cats, once their territory is established, bobcats rarely travel more than a few miles from their home dens. Locally, our bobcats prefer cliffs and rocky slopes with some cover vegetation. Bobcats are reasonably tolerant of human disturbance of their habitats and have adapted well to light urban development. On the eastern side of Albuquerque, it is common to encounter bobcats within residential areas, especially those that have been xeriscaped to match the surrounding wild environment. Because bobcats usually do not travel far

from where they are born, they may live their entire lives in proximity to humans. They are often nonchalant around people and can unnerve folks who expect a wild animal to bolt and quickly run away.

Bobcats will mate anytime of the year but generally have a mating season which extends from February until September in New Mexico. This is the only time male and female bobcats associate with each other. Courting rituals can be noisy affairs involving much screaming, hissing, and caterwauling. Male bobcats may mate with several females, but the females will usually mate with only one male. Once mated, the male parts company with his chosen partner of the moment. Observations suggest that only resident female bobcats with established territories can raise litters. Normally a female will give birth to a litter only once a year. Gestation is 50-70 days with up to seven, but most commonly two to four, "kittens" being born in a den hidden in a hollow log, under a rock ledge, or in a dense brush thicket.

When first born, the kittens have faint marks on their backs and sides and have dark streaks on their faces. These facial streaks will fade as they grow older while the body marking colors will deepen. Like all cats, bobcat kittens are born "blind" and will open their eyes after nine to ten days. They will nurse for about three to four months and, at five months of age, the mother will take them out to start hunting lessons. The kittens will stay with their mother until the next breeding season (8-10 months). Surviving kittenhood is a challenge. While adult bobcats have few natural enemies, humans and mountain lions being the primary killers of adults, kittens are often killed by owls, raptors, coyotes, and foxes. Cannibalism is also an issue. Wandering male bobcats are known to steal and kill kittens as prey. If they survive, female bobcats mature much faster than the males. A female is mature at one year while a male takes two years to mature. A wild bobcat may live 12-13 years but they have been known to live over 33 years in captivity.



(Picture 5 -Bobcat kitten on a fence in four Hills Village. Photo by Steve Brugge 2018)



(Pictures 6,7,8- Bobcat kitten descending a tree after climbing up 25 feet in Four Hills Village. Photos by Steve Brugge, 2021)

Bobcats have occasionally been domesticated- at least partially. In the 1980's the skeletal remains of a bobcat were discovered in a >2000-year-old grave in Illinois. The grave, which is thought to be related to the Hopewell culture, contained both human remains and those of a young bobcat which was surrounded by beads. It has been suggested that this bobcat was a beloved pet, buried with the beaded collar it wore in life. More recently, Calvin Coolidge, the 30<sup>th</sup> US President, was presented with a bobcat named "Smokey" by his Tennessee constituents. "Silent Cal" kept the bobcat for few months in the White House before rehoming it in a zoo.

Before you consider trying to entice a bobcat to live with you, remember that one of the bobcat's alternate common names is "wildcat". Pound for pound, the bobcat is one of the fiercest fighters in the North American animal kingdom. The female is much more aggressive than the male, especially when defending her territory and/or her young. It is no coincidence that more than 200 US high schools and colleges use the "Wildcat" moniker for their sports teams. Trying to domesticate a bobcat is strongly frowned upon by the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. With very few exceptions, current state laws restrict keeping live bobcats to certified zoos and research facilities.

The bobcat is thought to have evolved from the Eurasian lynx (*L. lynx*). The progenitors of the modern bobcat crossed from Asia to the North America by way of the Bering Land Bridge during the Pleistocene, starting about 2.6 million years ago, and becoming established in the Canadian portion of North America by 1.8 million years ago. The first bobcat wave to move into southern North America arrived about 20,000 years ago. These animals were cut off from northern North America by another cycle of glaciation and the southern population evolved into the modern bobcat (*Lynx rufus*). It is thought that a second lynx population arrived from Asia and settled into the then isolated northern lands, cross breeding with the pre-existing northern bobcat population and evolving into today's Canadian Lynx (*Lynx canadensis*). These two closely related populations do occasionally mate and hybridization does occur.

Today's population of bobcats is considered to be mostly stable, and in fact, is growing in some areas. It is present in all 48 coterminous US states. Heavy snows and competition with its larger cousin, the Canadian Lynx (*Lynx canadensis*), limit its range in southern Canada, while the development of tropical climate limits their spread to the south in Mexico.

Bobcats survived the widespread government-sponsored predator culling efforts by poison, trapping, and hunting in the early 1900's when it was erroneously assumed that they were major predators of livestock. Bobcats will not attack horses or cattle but will rarely hunt smaller livestock such as sheep, pigs, goats, and chickens. Modern research shows that less than 5% of smaller livestock kills can be associated with bobcats and many of these reported killings may be secondary, where the bobcat is actually only feeding on the remains of another predator's kill.

Currently, bobcats are legally hunted for fur in 38 US states and 7 provinces in Canada. The primary market for their fur skins is the developing nations in Asia. Although hunting and trapping can be a threat to maintaining healthy bobcat populations, even more serious threats are habitat fragmentation, loss of habitat, and illegal hunting and poisoning by ranchers and farmers who still assume that bobcats are significant predators of livestock. Bobcats are protected furbearers in New Mexico. Here, there is an established season for hunting and trapping (from November 1 to March 15) and a special license is required. Outside of this season, if you have serious issues with a bobcat, you must check with the NM Department of Game and Fish before trapping, moving, or using lethal control on bobcats. If you sight a bobcat and it is not doing any significant damage to your property, do not call the NM Department of Game and Fish to have it removed. The official stance is that we have built our homes within the pre-existing bobcat territories, and that bobcats are beneficial apex hunters who help control the rodent population (think- rabbits in your gardens, tree rats in your attic, and the potential spread of Hantavirus and Bubonic plague).

In lightly urbanized environments, such as the foothills of Albuquerque, the greatest threat to bobcats are the various rodent poisons people use around their homes. The use of rodenticides has been directly linked to very high mortality rates in bobcats (and other rodent hunting carnivores) either directly from the effects of the anticoagulants introduced by eating poisoned rats, mice, chipmunks and ground squirrels, or secondarily, from severe mite infestations (known as “notoedric mange” or “feline scabies”) occurring after these poisons have badly weakened the cat’s immune system. In one study, made in California in 2012, bobcats catching and eating poisoned rodents resulted in 51% of the collared bobcats dying during the study (confirmed by liver autopsies). If you do have a rodent problem, please consider using alternative control measures such as rodent traps and vegetation management.

In closing, we are squatters in the territories held by one of preeminent large predators of New Mexico. Bobcats settled in this region over 20,000 years ago. Intensive settlement in Albuquerque area began a little over 400 years ago and Four Hills Village started building about 60 years ago. All in all, these very intelligent ‘cats have been very tolerant of us, our homes, and our pets. Bobcat attacks on humans, adults and children, are extremely rare. Most documented attack cases involved a bobcat defending itself, or its young, or the bobcat being sick (rabies). There have been no proven fatal attacks by bobcats on humans in the all of North America. They have protected us from overpopulation of rodents, the damage they do, and the diseases they carry. Our side of the bargain is to keep our pets and livestock out of the prey population. That means walking your dog on a leash in the Open Spaces so it doesn’t run off into a bobcat-watched game trails, keeping an eye on your cat or dog when they are out in you fenced yard, keeping them inside at night, and keeping them quiet so they don’t attract these apex hunter’s attention, particularly in lean prey years (droughts). If you can’t bring your pets inside at night, then keep them safe in well-built enclosures with sturdy roofs- remember the bobcat’s ability to take down and kill much larger animals, 12-foot leaps, superb climbing skills, and 30+ mph sprints.

While bobcats generally seek to stay out of our way, when you hike our Open Space trails, or walk the streets of our neighborhood in the early and late hours of the day, keep an eye out for our bobcats. Be careful not to come close to an occupied den, a protective mother bobcat teaching her kittens to hunt, or to corner any bobcat where it cannot easily flee. They have rightfully earned their name, “wildcat” and to be a true symbol of the freedoms and responsibilities of the American West.