
Bobcat

by: Margaret Stewart

THE MOST COMMON, BUT RARELY SEEN, SOUTHWESTERN CAT



The Bobcat crouched on the crown of the 25-foot saguaro, surveying the desert from his vantage point. His tawny-colored fur shone cream in the blaze of the early morning sun as he shifted the big pads of his feet on the thorny perch.

The quiet dawn was broken by the angry whistle of a Harris' hawk, followed by quarrelsome scolding from a pair of cactus wrens. The neighborhood wildlife all knew that the saguaro on which the bobcat sat was the property of the Harris' hawk. Their normal routine had been upset, and they waited uneasily to see what this interloper would do next.

Bobcats (*Lynx rufus*) are the most common wild members of the cat family in the Southwest. Because they hunt at night and spend the days in well-hidden retreats among rocks or bushes, they are rarely seen. This animal, staring at the roofs of Carefree from his saguaro roost, was an anomaly among the usually shy bobcats.

The local birds and animals had good reason to worry. Bobcats are an important part of Nature's plan for rodent control. Their menu consists of cottontails, jackrabbits, small rodents, pack rats, ground nesting birds and insects.



Occasionally a bobcat will feast on a young deer, but the animal cannot run long distances in pursuit. Instead it hunts by stealth, waiting silently beside wildlife trails until it can pounce on its prey. This one may have been checking out the potential food supply in the neighborhood.

The bobcat began to back slowly down the saguaro until it could step onto a cluster of arms and drop to the ground. His athletic thirty-pound frame disappeared into the thick tangle of desert, and we could catch only random glimpses of the tufts on his black-edged ears as he moved on muscular legs toward our house.

The Harris' hawk immediately recaptured his territory, whistling his outrage and defiance to anyone who would listen.

The visitor padded his way to a more comfortable perch, a big mesquite just outside our patio, and leaped up to the crotch of the tree. Like all members of the cat family, the bobcat is equipped with strong retractile and extremely sharp claws that help him climb, as well as catch food.



Once up the tree he seemed to vanish again, as his coat of yellowish tan mottled with black spots blended with the light and shade under the canopy of leaves and branches. If disturbed while resting, a bobcat will lie perfectly still, depending on this protective coloration to escape detection. Only when driven off will it bound to another hiding place.

Now the cactus wrens were upset. This was the tree where they hunted for their morning bugs, and they shared it only with the cardinal who normally greeted the sun from the topmost branch. This morning he was nowhere to be seen, but the cactus wrens hopped on the tips of the branches, just out of reach, furiously denouncing the stranger. Horrors! Was he planning to settle down here?

The female bobcat bears one litter of two to four kittens a year. In the spring or early summer she finds a den in a pile of rocks or a hollow log, brushes out the debris and gives birth to offspring that resemble house-cat kittens. By the time they



are half-grown they will begin nightly hunting forays with their mother. The male bobcat takes no part in providing for the family.

After a few minutes of gazing over our wall, the bobcat dropped from the mesquite branch and leaped gracefully into the patio. He strolled around the pool, sticking an inquisitive nose into nooks and crannies, raising his head to listen and sniff the air. Then he was gone. Back over the wall, invisible among the catclaw and creosote bush. The neighborhood wildlife nervously renewed their search for food, and the Harris' hawk continued the warning "karr" from the top of his saguaro.

We may not catch another glimpse of this round-faced cat with the handsome sideburns; he may have decided that other fields have fatter rabbits. But now when the coyotes sing at night, we sometimes detect a shriller sound. Perhaps it's the back-alley yowl of a bobcat searching for a mate.

