
Cattin' Around with the Bobcats

by: Lynne Hoss

ENJOY WHAT YOU CAN SEE IN OUR SONORAN DESERT FOOTHILLS

photos at home: Lynne Hoss



Wildlife sightings are frequent here in the desert foothills, connecting us to nature in a special way! One of the more elusive species in our area is the bobcat (*Lynx rufus*). Also called wildcat, bob-tailed cat or bay lynx, the bobcat resembles a house cat, but is about twice the size and has a short tail, 6 to 7 inches long. I have enjoyed watching young kits chase each other around, frisking like young kittens. With catlike faces, conspicuous side whiskers and a neck ruff, their body color ranges from tan to gray with whitish undersides and mottled dark spots. Their long erect ears are tipped with one-inch black tufts. Weighing 15 to 35 pounds, they are 2.5 to 3 feet long and males are larger.

Bobcats occur below 8,000 feet from southern Canada to Mexico, but are mostly absent from north central states such as Illinois, Ohio, Missouri and Iowa. In Arizona, they are found in all habitat types, from low elevation desert to high up in the mountains. They can thrive as long as there is water, abundant prey and a rock crevice or refuge in which to rear their young. As opportunistic hunters and carnivores with keen vision and hearing, bobcats hunt in open or semi-open areas for any prey available, including insects, fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds and small mammals. In our area, they especially like rabbits and pack rats. They hunt in



random, zigzag patterns, but seldom give chase, preferring meals that are easy to catch. They are also known to pounce from trees and have been seen atop saguaros.

With the extensive local drought and dried up natural water sources, bobcat sightings have increased in populated areas within sight of Black Mountain. It is likely that availability of water in pools and an abundance of prey (which increases when people feed birds and other wildlife) create an amenable habitat. Although they are primarily nocturnal with peaks of activity at dawn and dusk, daytime activity has also been reported locally.

Bobcat territory ranges from 2 to 20 square miles, with size depending on population densities and density of prey species. Male territory overlaps several of the smaller female territories, which don't overlap. Territorial boundaries are marked with urine, feces and scent gland secretions, and scat is in segments, usually containing hair and bone of its prey. Bobcats select underground dens in rocky places, or may use a hollow tree or the underground den of another species. They often mate on rocky ledges. In our foothills area, this may translate to parapet walls on flat roofs!



Bobcat enjoying the Pinnacle Peak trail

Breeding times are typically reported to be in the spring, but in our area can occur in any month. Their piercing screams and squalls are loudest during mating season. A male mates with several females and is driven away after breeding so a female can raise the litter alone. With a 62-day gestation period and one litter per year, females usually birth 1 to 4 kits. Weaning takes place at eight weeks and hunting with the parent begins at five months. Both sexes are reproductively active throughout life; males reach sexual maturity at 24 months, females at 12 months. Life span reports vary, with one source reporting 2 to 5 years in the wild and 15



years in captivity, and another reporting 13 years in the wild and 31 in captivity. Quite a difference!

Bobcats don't bother people, usually slipping away when they detect us, although

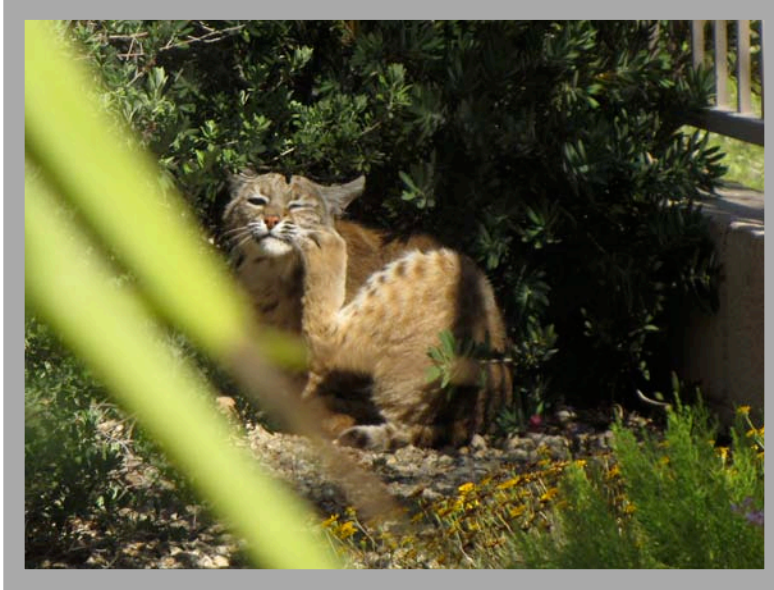


photo at home: Dave Mills

they can be fearless if cornered or wounded. Sometimes, instead of running off they are more "laid back," like when I planted ground cover next to a bobcat napping under a bush 12 feet away. I also filmed some unexplained behavior which involved two mature bobcats (gender unknown) taking a stance and facing each other

several feet apart. They ran towards each other, jumped in the air, bumped bellies, and returned to their starting points! The ritual (perhaps related to mating?) was then repeated. Afterwards, they returned to lie under bushes five feet away from each other.

Wildlife-viewing highlights such as these contribute to our unique quality of life in the Sonoran Desert foothills. So keep your eyes open, and see what you see!

