



**MassWildlife**

# Living With Wildlife

## The Bobcat in Massachusetts

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Photo by Bill Byrne

**Description:** The only wild cat now found in Massachusetts, the bobcat (*Lynx rufus*) is a medium sized feline approximately twice the size of a domestic house cat. The bobcat can be easily identified by its short, “bobbed” tail (3.5-7.5 inches), prominent face ruff, and slightly tufted ears. The coat of short, dense fur can vary in color from a yellowish to reddish brown with distinct or faint black spots along its flanks and white underparts that are also spotted with black. In summer their fur tends to be shorter and more reddish in color, becoming longer and much paler in the winter although there can be much variation in color among individual animals.

Adult bobcats weigh between 15 and 35 pounds and measure 28-47 inches in overall length. Size varies depending on sex with male bobcats being approximately 33% larger than their female counterparts. Bobcat tracks may sometimes be confused with the tracks of domestic housecats although adult bobcat prints are much larger than those left by a wandering housecat. Bobcat tracks have four toes in the front and back although the front foot actually has five toes. The fifth toe is raised high on the forefeet so it does not leave an impression when it walks. The claws also do not leave an impression, as they are usually retracted.

**Life History:** Bobcats breed from February through March. They are polygamous and do not form lasting pair bonds. The young are born after a 62 day gestation period sometime in April or May. Female bobcats produce one litter each year consisting of 1-4 kittens, with an average litter size of 2. The female is the exclusive provider given that the male bobcat does not participate in the raising of the young. The kittens are born in a den lined with dried grass, leaves, moss, and other soft vegetation that the female scrapes into the den. Dens are located in rock crevices, under rocky ledges, in caves, in brush piles, or in hollow trees, stumps, or logs. Females may use the same den sites for several years in a row.

At birth the kittens are blind and helpless but have already developed a thick coat of spotted fur. The female nurses the kittens until they reach two months of age. At one month of age the young begin taking solid food and venturing from the den. The young remain with the adult female until they are full grown, usually through their first fall or winter. Female bobcats reach sexual maturity at one year of age although they do not typically produce their first litter until two years of age. Male bobcats do not reach sexual maturity until two years of age. Bobcats live an average of twelve years in the wild and females continue to produce one litter per year until death. Although some young fall prey to owls, coyotes, and adult male bobcats, the number one mortality factor affecting the survival of both kittens and juvenile bobcats is related to food abundance.

**Habits:** Bobcats are shy, solitary, and generally elusive animals. Although they are generally silent, bobcats have a large repertoire of noises that they can produce. When confronted by an enemy, a bobcat may scowl, snarl, and spit, during the breeding season they may also be heard screaming from time to time. Bobcats maintain well defined home ranges that vary in size depending on prey abundance, season, climate, and the sex of the individual. Male bobcats maintain larger home ranges than females and it is not uncommon for individual animals to travel up to four miles daily. Both male and female bobcats use scent marking to mark well used trails and den sites. Their use of scent is thought to help individual animals avoid direct contact with each other as they move within their home ranges.



Bobcats can be active day or night but tend to exhibit crepuscular (dawn and dusk) activity. Their activity peaks three hours before sunset until midnight and again between one hour before and four hours after sunrise. They remain active year round and do not hibernate. Bobcats are proficient climbers and will climb trees to rest, chase prey, or escape from predators (chiefly domestic dogs). Like domestic cats, bobcats try to avoid water whenever possible but when forced to flee to water they can swim quite well.

Bobcats are well adapted to a wide variety of habitat types. They can be found using mountainous areas with rocky ledges, hardwood forests, swamps, bogs, and brushy areas close to fields. Bobcats are well capable of dealing with human influences but tend to avoid areas with extensive agriculturally cleared lands that eliminate other habitat types. Bobcats can be classified as common in central and western Massachusetts, present in northeastern Massachusetts, and rare to absent in southeastern Massachusetts. It is thought that one of the limiting factors to bobcat expansion is the absence of suitable rocky ledges that provide cover and den sites in certain areas of the state.

**Food:** Bobcats are classified as carnivores. They hunt by stalking (creeping from cover to cover) prey until they are close enough to pounce or they may wait on a trail or in a tree to ambush prey as it passes by, they may also run down their prey over short distances. Although bobcats have a fairly good sense of smell, they rely primarily on their keen eyesight and hearing to detect both prey and danger. They most commonly prey on medium sized animals such as rabbits and hares but will eat mice, squirrels, skunk, opossum, muskrat, birds, snakes, and other available items. Occasionally bobcats will prey upon larger animals such as deer but this is generally when other food items are scarce and only sick, injured, young or very old animals are likely to be killed. When food is plentiful, bobcats will cache the excess by covering it with leaves, grass or snow and return to feed off of it repeatedly.

Bobcats are an important natural resource in Massachusetts. They are classified as a furbearer species for which an established trapping and hunting season and management program exists. Compared to many other wildlife species bobcats rarely cause conflicts with human activities. Occasionally a bobcat may kill livestock but it is not a significant problem in Massachusetts. If you are experiencing problems with, or have questions regarding bobcats, contact your nearest MassWildlife District Office. Further information on bobcats and other native furbearers is also available on our website: [www.masswildlife.org](http://www.masswildlife.org).



(6/04)



For more information contact **MassWildlife** at:

**Western Wildlife District, Pittsfield:** (413) 447-9789

**Connecticut Valley Wildlife Dist., Belchertown:** (413) 323-7632

**Central Wildlife District, West Boylston:** (508) 835-3607

**Northeast Wildlife District, Acton:** (978) 263-4347

**Southeast Wildlife District, Bourne:** (508) 759-3406

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