

Conservation Corner

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After looking at several birds who once again fly over the Iowa landscape, today we'll take a closer look at a fur-bearing mammal who once again roams across Iowa. Many wildlife success stories, including trumpeter swans, river otters, and wild turkeys, have been written in part by restocking efforts of the Iowa DNR and other conservationists. Today's mammal, however, has repopulated the Hawkeye State pretty much on its own, with a little protection from trapping, hunting, and poaching along the way. And while today's mammal is one of three wild cats native to Iowa, it is the only one that still has established populations.

By now you've probably guessed today's featured guest, *Lynx rufus*, commonly called the bobcat. Bobcats, who can trace their family tree back 1.8 million years ago, today may be found from southern Canada to central Mexico. Bobcats are territorial and largely solitary, traveling up to 10 miles per week. And while bobcats prefer woodland areas, they also live in semi-deserts, urban edges, and swamplands.

Bobcats are crepuscular carnivores, which simply means they hunt during twilight hours. Rabbits and hares are their favorite prey, and studies on Iowa bobcats reveal a diet of 95 percent rabbits, mice, voles, and squirrels. Many area residents have reported being overrun with rabbits this winter. Perhaps what we need are a few more bobcats.

In Iowa, overhunting and loss of habitat caused a drastic drop in bobcat populations, and they were placed on the endangered species list in 1977. Once protected, numbers slowly and steadily rebounded, and in 2007 Iowa held its first limited season in many years. Today, in southern counties, one bobcat may be hunted or trapped per season per licensed fur harvester.

Many people confuse bobcats and mountain lions, but they are easy to tell apart. A mountain lion is 7 to 9 feet long including its 3-foot tail, weighs 90 to 160 pounds, and wears a brown, tawny fur coat. A bobcat, on the other hand, is only 3 feet long, with a bobbed tail of 6-7 inches, weighs 20 to 30 pounds, and wears a dark brown spotted coat with lighter belly fur.

Bobcats also roam across Native American mythology where the bobcat is often paired with the coyote as the elemental opposites of fog and wind. Tribal cultures include legends of how the bobcat got its spots and lost its tail. Did you know the bobcat is a clan animal of the Muscogee and Chickasaw Nations?

Recently a bobcat family was sighted on a trail cam just southwest of Des Moines. Several years ago, a solitary bobcat was sighted on a web cam at the Roetman Wetland south of Laurens. For a guaranteed sighting, drive by the Havelock mural, complete with bobcat and eagle, former mascots of the Havelock and Plover High Schools.

These secretive predators, while present in Iowa, are still uncommon to see in person. Have you seen a bobcat in the wild?

