



While cottontail rabbits are preferred, a Bobcat's diet may also include squirrels, cotton rats, opossums, birds, snakes, and insects.



A superb hunter, the Bobcat has all the weapons including "sideburns" that are thought to assist in hearing small prey.

## **Brunswick Wildlife Tracking Brunswick's Wildlife**

My bobcat adventure started out as a scouting trip for two future field trips, one that would specifically target Northern Bobwhite quail. As I drove to the crest of a slight hill, there in the dirt road below was a bobcat. Because I only had my low-powered binoculars nearby I had to watch through the windshield for a minute to make sure it was a cat not a fox. Then it started preening. Yep...one big pussy cat!

I could not believe my eyes when it came toward me and stopped and sat down about a hundred feet away. After a few minutes, it walked off the side of the road into the woods.

A few days later, my class found bobcat and quail tracks. So for several weeks, I stalked quail and finally got decent photos but never expected to see the bobcat again. Then in early July he crossed the road in front of me. After I pulled off and stopped, he turned back to check me out. Of course, these photos were taken out of my open window.

Mid-sized wildcats of the Lynx genera, Bobcats are found throughout North Carolina and are most numerous in the wooded habitats of our mountains and Coastal Plain. In the Lower Cape Fear they habitat bottomland hardwoods, pinewoods, swamps, and pocosins. In fact, Brunswick, Columbus, and Bladen counties have the highest bobcat populations in our state.

They are superb hunters, having all of the weapons. Like other felines they are highly specialized hunters with compact, strong, and limber bodies. The mottled coloration of their spotted coat serves as camouflage. Keen eyesight, great night vision, excellent hearing, good sense of smell, and sensitive whiskers are adaptations that enable nocturnal hunting.

Bobcats have very sharp, retractable claws and are excellent runners and climbers. They normally avoid swimming but are good swimmers when that skill is needed. Their

“sideburns” (facial ruffs that form a parabola) are thought to assist in hearing small prey by collecting sound waves and directing them toward the cat’s ears.

In the southeastern states, adult bobcats weigh approximately 16-30 pounds with males usually being the heavier. They are about twice the size of domestic cats in weight but may look larger than that because of their long legs and large paws.

Other characteristics of bobcats include a “bobbed” stubby tail, tipped with black on the top and white below and slightly-tufted, black-tipped ears that have white spots on the back.

Bobcats are crepuscular, meaning they are primarily active during the twilight at dawn and dusk. They hunt from a little before sunset to around midnight and then before dawn until approximately three hours after sunrise.

Because they have retractable claws, Bobcat tracks usually show four toes without claw marks. This differentiates their tracks from those of coyotes and dogs. Also, they directly register, meaning their hind prints fall almost on top of their front prints.

Generally Bobcats are not considered threatened but hunting and trading activities are monitored closely and regulated. They are endangered in Ohio, Indiana, and New Jersey; however, they were recently removed from the threatened lists of Illinois and Iowa.

Resilient Bobcats have adapted to living near humans given the required extent of wooded habitat. They may appear in backyards on the edge where development meets natural habitat and will usually climb a tree if challenged by a dog.

My quest continues, still stalking bobcats and quail, while learning more about tracks and signs. The tracking class I took years ago was mainly spent tearing apart owl pellets and looking through the hair, bones, and teeth to try to determine the species of the meal. While that was a load of fun, I only learned a little about tracking other animals.

Fortunately I am addicted to Friends of the Library book sales. Usually several old nature books or field guides jump off the shelf into my bag...sometimes a first edition but mostly just a new “old friend”. At a recent sale I bought a copy of Peterson’s Field Guide to Animal Tracks by Olaus Murie, copyrighted in 1954. Awesome timing!

John Ennis



In our shared territory, my “prey” was this male Northern Bobwhite



My bobcat's hind track was approximately 1.9 inches long. The largest indentation is a two-lobed ball pad. (Penny diameter = 0.75 inches)