

Living With Bobcats in Broomfield

By Broomfield Wildlife Masters, Sheri Hoffman & Jonnie McFarland

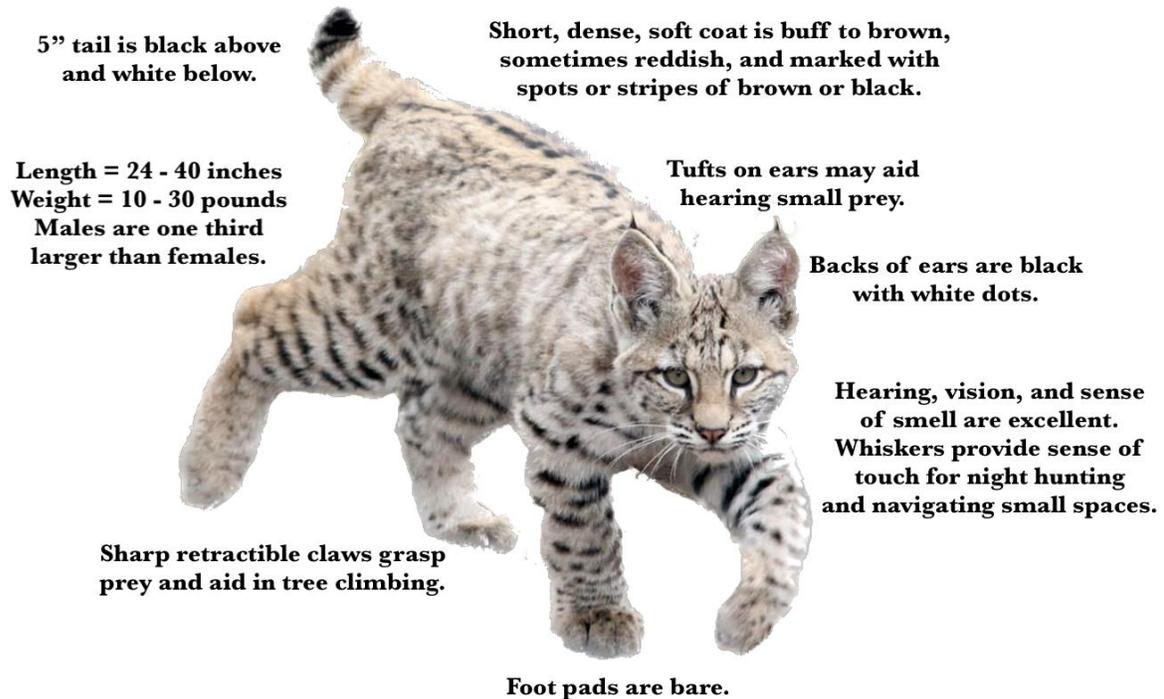


Photo by Cec Sanders, Wet Mountain Wildlife Rehabilitation

History of Bobcats

Bobcats are found from southern Canada to central Mexico and statewide throughout Colorado, with an estimated population between 2.4 and 3.6 million in the continental United States and about 12,000 in Colorado. They are most abundant in foothills, canyons, and mesas where brush, cliffs, outcroppings, and fallen timber provide suitable shelter and den sites. Because of their reclusive nature, these cats are rarely seen, although frequent recent sightings throughout Broomfield demonstrate that this species has now extended its territory and range to include Broomfield.

Appropriately named bobcats due to their short, "bobbed" tails, early American pioneers often called these elusive wild cats ol' spitfire or woods ghost. Human fascination with the species *Lynx rufus* can be seen in superstitions, myths, and legends long associated with the animals.

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, bobcats were thought to be a threat to livestock and game animals, so bounties were offered. After large spotted cats became protected by the U.S.

Endangered Species Act, the value of bobcat pelts increased dramatically. Today export of their pelts is controlled by the federal government, while state wildlife agencies, like Colorado Parks and Wildlife in Colorado, manage the species. Consequently, bobcat populations have become stable or are increasing throughout the United States.

Bobcat Behavior

About twice the size of domestic cats, bobcats are active year-round, both day and night, but they are most active at dawn and dusk (crepuscular). While they can live up to 12 years in the wild, the average life expectancy of a bobcat is between 2 and 4 years. Few predators, other than mountain lions or humans, are able to kill an adult, but kittens are killed by eagles, great horned owls, coyotes, foxes, bears, and adult male bobcats.

Solitary, quiet hunters, they eat rabbits, mice, voles, squirrels, birds, reptiles, and young deer. Less frequently, they will also kill poultry, lambs or kid goats, small pigs, and domestic cats. They hunt by sight and sound—sitting, crouching, listening, and watching until prey is spotted, when they make a quick dash, pounce, and bite. Remains of large kills are covered with debris and then revisited until mostly consumed.

Bobcats are skilled swimmers and climbers. They can leap to a height of 10 feet and run up to 30 mph. Although they can meow, chortle, chirp, hiss and growl, these solitary animals rarely use sound. During mating, however, their screams often are described as unsettling and can be heard up to a mile away.

A male's territory may cover 30 square miles and be shared with other males, while that of a single female is generally about 5 square miles. Territories are defended and marked with scent or claw marks on a trunk or fence post. Colorado researchers, tracking collared bobcats, have found that for yet undiscovered reasons, some of them take long trips outside their territories. Bobcats need large, interconnected wild lands to thrive, so human development can have a significant impact on their populations.

The only time that males and females associate is during mating, which generally happens in late winter or early spring. After a gestation of about 10 weeks, the female gives birth to between 2 and 4 furred, but blind kittens. The den is a simple shelter under a rock or log, lined with dry leaves, moss, or grass. By 4 weeks of age, the kittens begin to explore and are weaned by 7 to 8 weeks, remaining with their mother for about 8 months.



Bobcat recently observed hunting squirrels in a Broomfield yard.
Photo by Jackie McGlashan

Bobcat Coexistence Tips

Since bobcats can easily scale a 6-foot fence and climb trees, it is not feasible to keep them out of yards by exclusion methods. However, there are several methods that Broomfield residents can use to coexist with this rare and elusive species if they are seen:

1. Deter prey species away from your yard, including birds, mice, and rabbits.
 - Attractants for bobcats would be their natural prey, such as rabbits, mice, squirrels and birds
 - Birds: If you feed the birds and are concerned about a bobcat coming into your yard, remove the dropped seed and consider removing bird feeders and bird baths.
 - Mice: Since mice typically feed on seed under feeders, removing fallen seed will also keep the mice population down.
 - Rabbits: Keeping the rabbits out of your yard will involve excluding them by using chicken wire along the bottom of your fence and ensuring that there are no pass-through holes that the rabbits have dug under your fence, this typically only applies to the backyard. Please call the Wildlife Masters hotline (303-464-5554) for a more thorough explanation of rabbit exclusion methods.

2. Keep your pets from interacting with wildlife.
 - Monitor your pets to keep them from interacting with bobcats and other Broomfield wildlife to keep you, your pets, and other animals safe.
 - Keep your dogs on a leash when in Open Space and attended while in the backyard.
 - Keep your cats indoors to keep them and other wildlife safe.

3. Keep all food sources secure.
 - Always store pet food indoors.
 - Keep your grill clean of any food debris.
 - Cover compost piles.
 - If you keep chickens, keep your chicken coop in good repair and check frequently for predator activity. You might also consider installing a trail camera for early detection of a visitor in your backyard.

4. Remove hiding habitat.
 - Being ambush predators, bobcats lay in wait for prey to come along and watch what is happening around them. They look for prey animals' activity and places they can hide or stalk while hunting. By removing brush piles, wood piles or low-hanging tree branches and low pine boughs, you will eliminate places in your yard that would attract a bobcat to hide and hunt.

5. Haze.
 - You might also consider keeping a noisemaker near the back door. This could be a whistle or a tin can, half full of rocks and closed with duct tape. Blowing the whistle or shaking the can before going out will serve to scare or unsettle a cat that has decided to visit your yard. Bobcats are skittish by nature so interactions with humans are rare. If you see one in an unwanted place hazing it by yelling, waving arms and looking large would be a recommendation to scare it away.

Through following these steps you can eliminate attractants (prey) and areas for a bobcat to hide and wait which will make your yard less attractive for them.

Broomfield is home to many fascinating wildlife species and residents alike, which now includes bobcats. Being aware that bobcats are in Broomfield will give us a chance to protect our animals, remove attractants from our yard and possibly allow us a rare sighting of these elusive predators.

The Broomfield Wildlife Masters are local residents that volunteer their time to assist citizens with wildlife questions and concerns. For more information about dealing with problem or nuisance wildlife, call the Broomfield Wildlife Masters helpline at 303-464-5554. Please leave a message and a Wildlife Master will respond to you within 24 hours.

References:

Several sources were used to produce this publication, including references from The Nature Conservancy, Journal of Fish and Wildlife Management, the Smithsonian National Zoo, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, Colorado State University, Out There Colorado, and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.