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The Bobcat: Apparition of the Appalachians

[Matt Wasson](#) | [October 1, 2005](#) | [1 Comment](#)

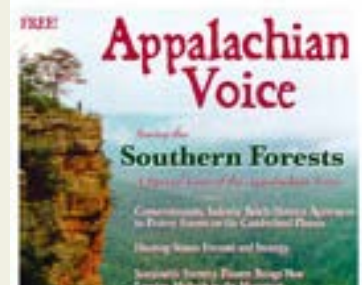
By R. Kelly Coffey

Terry Spivey, USDA Forest Service, www.forestryimages.org
[org/images/AppalachianVoice/AVOct05/Photos/circles/Circle_Bobcat.gif](http://www.forestryimages.org/images/AppalachianVoice/AVOct05/Photos/circles/Circle_Bobcat.gif)

Wild animals appeal to us for various reasons- the freedom of birds, the gracefulness of deer, the majesty of elk, and the strength and danger associated with bears. The fact that wild cats seem to possess all these characteristics in one animal may explain our fascination with them. Lions, for example, have been symbolic of royalty for centuries. An automobile manufacturer has enhanced the allure of its product by associating it with the jaguar. And who living in Appalachia has not heard numerous panther tales? The mention of big cats usually sends our imagination to exotic sites such as the savannas of Africa or the jungles of southeast Asia. But at least one cat- the bobcat- lives in Appalachia and is more prevalent than most people are aware.

A wild reputation

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The bobcat is about twice the size of a domestic cat, and is so named because of its short tail. A defining feature of the bobcat is the antenna-like dark hairs that extend from the points of its ears. These hairs actually function as antennas, allowing the cat to pick up faint sounds that it could not otherwise hear.

Both “bobcat” and “wildcat” refer to the species *Lynx rufus*, although “wildcat” seems to be the more common term in Appalachia, as attested by the numerous creeks, roads, and ridges with “wildcat” in their names. The bobcat’s scientific name “lynx” can be confusing. Used as a common name, “lynx” refers to the Canada lynx, a different species found only in the most extreme northern reaches of Appalachia. “Wildcat” actually has a double-meaning, referring both to its distinction from the domestic cat (which, incidentally, descended from wild cats in Africa), and also to its disposition. The bobcat has a reputation as a ferocious cat. Its predatory attacks are rapid and vicious. In 1700 Carolina explorer John Lawson noted that the bobcat “is quite different from those in Europe; being more nimble and fierce, and larger.” Interestingly, although Lawson traveled over much of Carolina, the name he used for the bobcat was “mountain-cat,” despite the fact that the bobcat resides throughout North America.

A recent encounter with a bobcat illustrates many of the habits and behaviors of the animal. One evening around dusk I came upon a rabbit that seemed preoccupied; I was very close to the animal but it showed no fear of me and yet had a frantic look. Focusing on the rabbit, I failed at first to notice a bobcat emerging from the woods only a few feet away. Startled, I stepped back, but the wildcat was so concentrated on the rabbit that it seemed oblivious to my presence. The rabbit quickly darted away with the bobcat bounding close behind.

This bobcat sighting is notable because, after living in the same community for many years, I had never seen a wildcat nor heard of anyone else in the community who had seen one. “Wood’s

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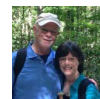


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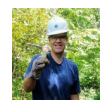


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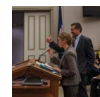
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ghost” was a common nickname for the bobcat in the past, due to its secretive nature. Even when much of North America contained vast uninhabited tracts, the bobcat was rarely seen. Nevertheless, the apparent scarcity of the wildcat is deceptive. The animal is not endangered and quite common; in fact, some states designate a hunting season for the cat. In the past, the cat was hunted because it often preyed on farm animals and, on rare occasions, humans. In addition, early settlers and Indians believed that various bobcat body parts would remedy many diseases. John Lawson, for example, noted that bobcat fur worn around the body would relieve “weak and cold stomachs.”

Haunts of the wood’s ghost

Bobcats thrive in areas with a mixture of both mature forests and young successional forests. Hollow trees found in older woods provide den sites, in addition to rock outcroppings and caves. Brushy young forests and meadow openings supply habitat for small mammals that the cats eat. Anyone with a domestic cat knows that the animal tends to be more active at dawn and dusk, spending much of the daytime napping. This behavior is characteristic of bobcats as well, which accounts for their hidden nature and aids them in hunting more effectively.

Like all cats, the bobcat is a meat-eater. Its indiscriminate diet consists of whatever it can catch- small mammals, snakes, birds, an occasional weakened deer, and rabbit, its staple food. The bobcat’s taste for rabbit is literally legendary. A Cherokee animal myth describes a deal between a bobcat and a rabbit whereby the wildcat agrees to free the rabbit, and in exchange the rabbit tricks a flock of turkeys into coming close enough for the bobcat to snare. An Uncle Remus tale involving Brer Rabbit and a wildcat has a very similar story line.

Wildcat lore has been somewhat overshadowed through the years by lore of its relative, the cougar. If the panther had never

inhabited Appalachia, our big cat legends would be bobcat tales. However, the importance of the bobcat to our cultural (and/or natural heritage) should not be underestimated. Though its presence is often concealed to the eyes, the “wood’s ghost”, who prowls just beyond view retains an element of danger and an air of mystery.

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