

## Bobcat Betrothals

Story and Photography by Susan C. Morse

Yesterday a warm mid-March sun shone upon a few inches of fresh snow. By nightfall, it was cold again and starry clear--perfect for bobcat courtship.

Evidence of last night's wildcatting activities were all about. Over the years, I've gotten to know a certain tom-bobcat's tracks, and whenever I encounter them, I'll poke along for a spell to see what he's been up to. I always backtrack him – out of respect for his privacy and his absolute need not to be harassed, frightened, or forced to expend precious energy, especially during late winter's season of potential food shortage and deep snow.



The tom's tracks led me back towards his refugia among high cliffs and talus. I purposefully did not intrude there. Instead, I circled around to the other side of the bony ridge to pick up his trail. I've encountered this pattern hundreds of times all over Vermont and New Hampshire. Bedsites, called "lays," are safely sequestered atop ledges or precarious talus jumbles facing the south/southwest, where the winter sun provides much-appreciated warmth.



Times are good for bobcats in Vermont and New Hampshire – much better than earlier in the twentieth century, when over-hunting, a lack of habitat, and a paucity of prey severely limited their numbers. In addition to stricter game laws, Bobcats now benefit from access to lower-elevation habitats, thanks to the re-growth and re-connection of countless thousands of acres of forest cover throughout Vermont and New Hampshire. Such habitats are often more supportive of bobcats than higher-elevation sites are, offering them easier living in the winter and a greater abundance and diversity of prey.

The tom's tracks showed that, at sundown, the napping cat had abandoned his bed and headed out for a date and possibly a nice meal in the forest and wetlands below. Along the way, the sometimes-hurrying tom's tracks frequently stopped, backed up, or paused beside rotten stumps or the undersurfaces of logs or conifer boughs. If you kneel down at such places and sniff the surface facing the hindfoot tracks, you'll detect the distinctive odor of cat urine. "Elixir de kitty!"

Farther along, the tom created a “scratch” or “scrape.” Often under a protective rock overhang, bobcats of both sexes will scratch backwards, first with one hind foot then the other, creating a rectangular-shaped trough that culminates in a pile of absorbent materials – soft earth, leaves, evergreen needles, and sometimes snow. They then anoint the pile with secretions from between the toes of their feet, plus some urine. March is the height of the bobcat mating season, and this tom used his scratch as a personal ad, conveying his identity, location in time and space, and social and sexual status to the local females.

People mistakenly believe that bobcats feast primarily on snowshoe hare; they actually are meso-carnivore generalists, and the overall diversity and abundance of their prey species have increased in recent decades. Typical bobcat prey includes gray squirrels, turkeys, grouse, opossums, beavers, and deer. The recovery of beavers and their associated wetland habitats have been a boon to bobcats.

This is not to say that the bobcats are completely in the clear. While our forest cover in Vermont and New Hampshire expanded greatly during the past century, that increase has come to an end. New housing and busier roads are encroaching on our forestlands, whittling away at prime, lowland bobcat habitat and threatening the corridors that link these core habitats together.

Three hours and nearly 4 miles later, I decided to backtrack an older set of female bobcat tracks, hoping they would lead me back to where I started. Her smaller feet, shorter strides, and relatively infrequent scent-marking activities provided clues regarding her gender, but her behaviors were the most revealing. She was more focused on hunting than reproduction, slinking from patch of cover to patch of cover, tree to stump to rock.

She’d flatten herself behind a log and position herself to peer around looking for prey from a concealed place. In contrast to the tom’s destination-driven, swaggering trail, with sex messages liberally sprayed all over the place, the female was cryptic and careful.



Her “modus operandi” in deep snow is to get above it all and carefully conserve her energy by walking along fallen logs and even skinny branches, which she negotiated with feline grace and balance.

The bobcat is special – quintessentially wild yet wonderfully near us. No different than the leopard or the lion, the wide-ranging bobcat walks, naps, hunts, and finds a mate in a vast matrix of habitats that must be conserved if this and so many other species are to survive. Walk along a bobcat’s backtrail for the day, and you’ll get the picture – it’s the big picture.

**.... Wild yet wonderfully near us!**