

Canada Lynx



Photo credit: Darren Colello

Lynx canadensis

The lynx is an animal that truly represents the wilderness of Canada. Sometimes called the “shadow of the forest,” lynx are secretive, elusive animals rarely observed by people. The lynx is one of three wild felids native to Canada, along with the cougar and the bobcat.

Characteristics

Lynx are medium sized felids with an average adult length of 74-107 cm (30-43 inches), and an average weight of 16 kg (35 pounds). This species is recognized by its grey to light brown fur colour, a short black-tipped tail, long black ear tufts, and large well-furred feet. Its close relative, the bobcat is the only other animal that can be easily confused with the lynx. Bobcats however are generally slightly smaller, have less defined ear tufts and have reddish-brown fur with more visible spots.

Life Cycle

Lynx are solitary animals and only associate with the opposite sex during mating, which occurs in late winter (January to March). After a gestation period of 60-63 days, a litter of one to six kittens is produced, usually between April and early June. Kittens’ eyes first open at around eight to ten days old. The kittens are born with streaked and spotted fur. They remain with the female only through their first winter. The young begin foraging with their mother after two months and are weaned at one year. Shortly after they are no longer dependent on mother’s milk, the sub-adult lynx will disperse and find their own ranges. Lynx will establish and maintain a home range by creating scents posts by urinating on trees, deadfalls, and rocks. Male lynx maintain large ranges that often encompass those of several females. In the wild, the average life span for the lynx is 15 years.

Habitat

Lynx are found throughout Canada, from Newfoundland to British Columbia and from the border to the far north. They are found in the area covered by the boreal forest and are usually absent from coastal areas. In the United States, lynx inhabit Alaska and the northern portions of Washington, Oregon, Wyoming, Idaho, Montana, and Colorado. However, their numbers have diminished in these lower states.

The lynx’s preferred habitat is deep coniferous forests interspersed with rocky areas, bogs, swamps, and thickets. This habitat provides them with prey, den sites, cover, and protection from severe weather as much of their range may be snow-covered for several months of the year.

Close cousins of the Canada lynx include the Eurasian lynx, which lives in Turkestan, central Asia, and Scandinavia, and the Iberian lynx, which inhabits the Mediterranean region in suitable habitats in Spain and Portugal.

Behaviour

The lynx's diet is varied: they will prey on rodents such as mice and voles, several bird species, and even the young of deer, caribou, mountain goat, and bighorn sheep. However, far and away the lynx's most important prey is the snowshoe hare. The lynx is so dependent on the hare that population levels of these two species rise and fall predictably approximately every ten years. As snowshoe hare numbers are reduced so too are lynx populations. With fewer lynx, hare numbers rebound, then once again with increased prey, the lynx population will rise. Understanding this predator-prey relationship is very important because it shows that the predator is never responsible for the ultimate endangerment of the prey. The snowshoe hare actually relies on the lynx to keep its population stable and healthy.

Lynx are not especially fast runners, so instead they prefer to use stealth to ambush their prey. The lynx's elongated ear tufts act like antennae to enhance their excellent sense of hearing.

Lynx do not hibernate. They are active throughout the winter and have several adaptations to cope with the snow and cold. The lynx's large well-furred feet act like snowshoes when moving across deep snow. In fact, its paw print is so big it can be the same size as the print of the much larger cougar. Lynx do well in temperatures that may drop below -45°C as their fur is dense with a soft inner layer and outer guard hairs to protect the animal from the harsh climate.

The lynx have a wide variety of vocalizations that are used to convey emotions, including growls, shrieks, hisses, and purring.

Threats

Natural predators of the lynx include wolves and cougars. Also, in some areas, the lynx may compete for food with bobcats and even wolverines and golden eagles. However, their most extreme threat comes from humans. Habitat destruction and the trapping of lynx for their beautiful pelts have caused their numbers to decline. In 2000, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service classified the lynx as a "federally threatened species." As a result of this status, trapping is now only permitted in Alaska, Idaho, and Montana. Though threatened in the United States, the lynx is considered "not at risk" in Canada. Consequently, the lynx is still trapped in every province except Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick, where their numbers are considered low. Everywhere else, trapping is governed by regulations as needed from year to year among districts within a province. Many jurisdictions have also placed limits on the number of lynx that can be killed.

What We Can Do To Help

Preservation of the lynx's habitat is one of the most important things that can be done to help conserve this species. The coniferous forests in which the lynx live are also home to a great diversity of plant and animal species. Known as the 'lungs of the planet', forests are vital ecosystems that provide air filtration and natural resources that are critical to the survival of many species, including humans.

Education is another positive way to help protect species like the lynx. Learning and teaching as much as possible about wildlife may increase people's recognition and knowledge of the importance of biodiversity. One can volunteer help at conservation-education organizations such as the Northwest Wildlife Preservation Society. Experiences like these provide the individual with many opportunities to learn and help out with wildlife and environmental issues.

Another way to help out lynx populations, would be to reduce the demand for their pelts on the fur market. We can encourage North Americans to appreciate and respect wildcats like the lynx.

When spending time in wildlife habitat, do not leave garbage and other litter where it does not belong. Enjoy the experience of wilderness and be respectful of the environment.

Other Interesting Facts

- The word “lynx” is the same for a single animal, a group of animals, or the species according to the *Oxford Canadian Dictionary*, although some dictionaries accept “lynxes” as a plural.
- Canada lynx evolved from the Eurasian lynx around two million years ago from a felid lineage dating back more than 12 million years.
- The largest home range of a lynx ever recorded was that of an adult male and measured 783 square kilometres (302 square miles).

Where & When To View The Canada Lynx

Lynx are extremely elusive and difficult to observe in the wild. They may be active at any time during the day; however, they are more nocturnal in areas disturbed by humans. The best chances to view them would be in remote regions in coniferous forests of north-central British Columbia. The Spatsizi Plateau and Tatlatui Provincial Parks provide pristine wilderness for lynx and many other species of wildlife. Following lynx tracks and observing signs left by the animal such as clumps of fur or the remains of their kill provide the best opportunity to catch a glimpse of these secretive animals.

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