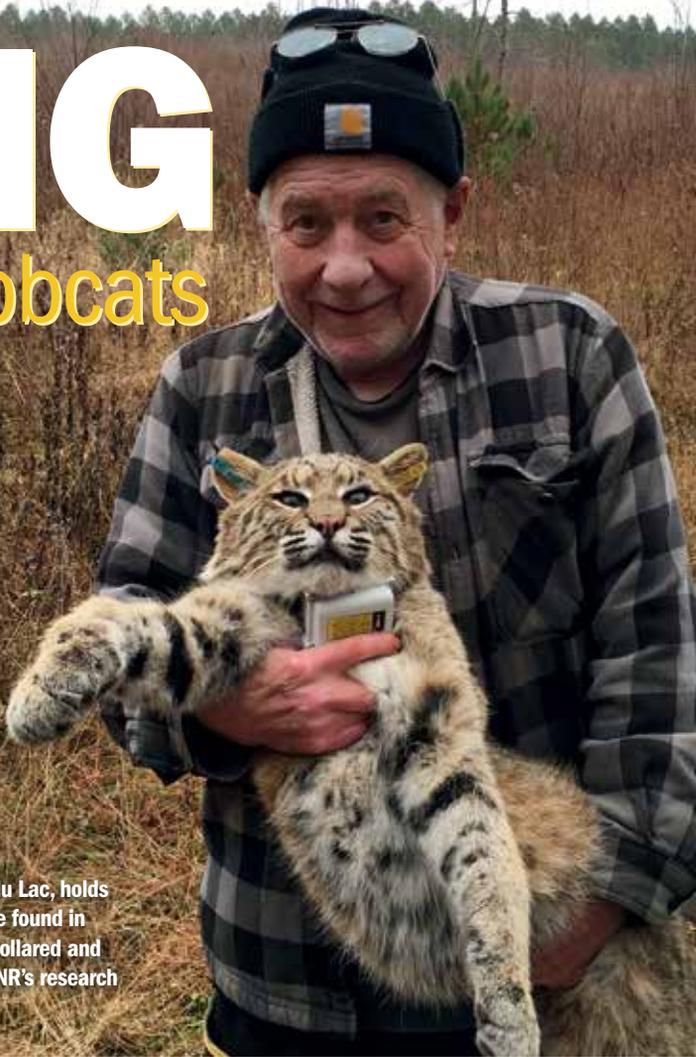


BIG on bobcats

Mark Mumm, Fond du Lac, holds one of six bobcats he found in his traps that were collared and tracked as part of DNR's research program.



TIM WATSON

TRACKING PROGRAM ASSISTS RESEARCH ON THE STATE'S GROWING POPULATION.

Nathan Roberts and Nick Forman

Despite a reputation of secrecy and elusiveness, bobcats are increasingly in the spotlight in Wisconsin. With a recent uptick in citizen sightings, a healthy bobcat population and current research efforts by the DNR, people are taking notice of bobcats, especially in areas where many thought they weren't around.

In recent years, the Wisconsin DNR has received reports of numerous sightings of bobcats by citizens across a large portion of the state. Many of these sightings have been reported by hunters who spotted a bobcat while in a tree stand or blind, as bobcats move relatively unaware of — or uninterested in — the camouflaged observer watching their moves.

The increasing popularity of trail

camera use among landowners in Wisconsin also has opened the door to unprecedented observations of bobcats in the wild. There are frequent submissions of photos to DNR staff of bobcats with litters of kittens moving through fields, bobcats marking their territories and bobcats sitting at birdfeeders on back decks, taking full advantage of an easy meal source.

In the same way that landowners

have been able to identify a cherished big buck repeatedly caught on camera, many landowners have been able to distinguish big toms who frequent their areas or queens who occasionally bring their kittens through on a stroll.

The increased sightings aren't only a result of a more observant and interested public, they also are due to the apparent natural expansion and growth of Wisconsin's bobcat population. Once thought of as strictly a denizen of the northwoods, these cryptic predators are now taking advantage of a wide variety of habitats across Wisconsin.

Bobcats are ambush predators, and their size (up to 50 pounds in Wisconsin) makes them best suited to small game such as rabbits, squirrels and other rodents. Wherever you might find small mammals, given there is ample cover for safety and comfort, a bobcat might call that place home.

Based on bobcat sightings, it seems the general trend in Wisconsin is that bobcats are expanding their range across the state, a good indication of a healthy population. However, the specific details of this expansion — where bobcats are, how they're proliferating, what resources they're using and how they're moving — aren't well-documented.

Beginning in the fall of 2014, DNR researchers began placing GPS tracking collars on bobcats in two counties in northern Wisconsin to better understand the state's bobcat population and its apparent ongoing expansion. These GPS collars collect multiple locations per day, and this data informs research on where these bobcats are, what habitats they're using, what factors affect their movements and survival, and what kind of territories and territorial overlap these animals have.

The bobcats being collared by researchers are, in large part, voluntarily reported by trappers who incidentally catch bobcats during efforts to trap other species. These trappers are eager to learn more about the population and enthusiastic to have research staff come out to collar the animals. In fact, a portion of the funding for this research is derived from an increase to the bobcat license fee that was requested by hunters and trappers.

In some cases, researchers may coordinate with landowners who report frequent sightings of bobcats to try and capture the bobcats they see. Trappers

and landowners who help to capture a bobcat receive updates on “their” collared bobcat as to how it’s been faring and whether it’s still in the area.

The opportunity to collaborate with landowners and trappers has immensely increased the number of bobcats researchers have been able to collar. These growing numbers are impressive to anyone who knows how difficult it is to lay eyes on, let alone get their hands on, a bobcat.

Three years after the start of the tracking project, researchers are collaring bobcats in 20 counties: 12 in northern Wisconsin and eight in southwestern Wisconsin. They have collared upwards of 60 bobcats in that time frame, which is unheard of for most radio-collaring research studies on such an elusive carnivore.

All of the data collected from collared animals will be combined with information on bobcat sightings across Wisconsin, as well as data on age and reproductive success collected from harvested animals, to feed into the population estimation and monitoring that informs species management decisions in the state. By combining the knowledge and efforts of trappers and citizen scientists with cutting-edge research techniques, the DNR is learning more than ever about this elusive species and its role in Wisconsin. ❧

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DNR FILES

Placing GPS collars on bobcats in northern Wisconsin has helped DNR scientists to gain better understanding of the animal’s apparent population expansion in the state.