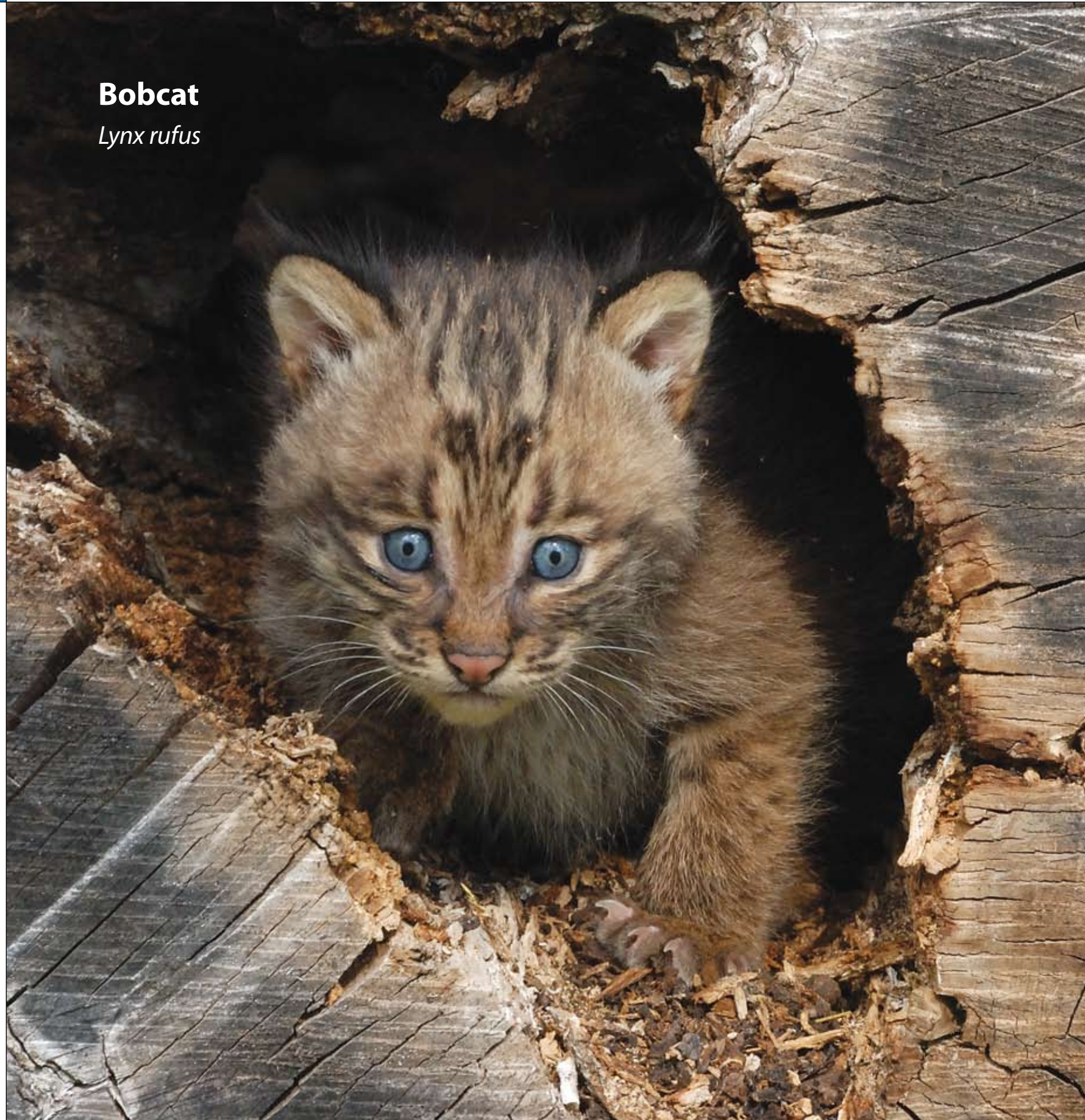


### Bobcat

*Lynx rufus*



BY KURT RINEHART

If you are lucky enough to see a bobcat in the woods, the experience can be as disorienting as it is exhilarating. An alert bobcat freezes in mid-stride and stares intently at you, sizing you up, judging the risk you represent. It can stand so motionless and its spotted coat camouflages it so well that it seems to disappear in front of your eyes. One minute it's there and the next, you're not so sure, until it quickly lopes out of sight. If the cat sees you first, you haven't a chance of discovering it.

Bobcats have never been extremely abundant, but their current densities may be diminished due to the eastward expansion of the coyote. In the Northeast, where deer meat, either fresh-killed or carrion, forms a significant portion of bobcat winter diet, the addition of coyotes to the predator guild may leave room for fewer bobcats. Most people wouldn't guess it, but bobcats can and do kill deer on occasion. It is not unheard of to find tracks in the snow of a bobcat stalk and rush showing a leap that intersects the tracks of a panicked deer.

Rebounding fisher (or fisher cat) populations could also mean competition for snowshoe hares. When prey is plentiful, there is likely little conflict. If times are tough, competition could reduce access to adequate nutrition for this socially subordinate species. Coyotes have been seen to dominate bobcats in some studies and fisher may as well. Lowered nutrition means lowered reproduction and survival, the natural mechanisms for balancing predator populations.

The bobcat is a generalist predator, readily finding and consuming a range of different animal species. By and large the most common prey throughout its range is rabbits or hares. They also feed on deer, squirrels or small mammals like mice, voles, and birds. A bobcat's tracks often show where it sat and watched for prey. From the sit, the tracks will show a stalk: a slow, deliberate walk to within striking distance. A few vigorous bounds will cover the remaining distance.

Unknown population densities and possible competitive interactions are of interest to wildlife managers, but the most pressing conservation concern currently centers on the effects of roads and determination of critical habitat needs. Outside of legal

trapping, traffic collisions are the leading cause of bobcat mortality. Even if the cats are not dying directly on the road, high traffic levels can deter road crossing, making roads barriers to dispersal and movement. On a wildlife road-crossing study managed by the Audubon Society of New Hampshire in 2005 and 2006, I trailed a bobcat that approached and retreated from U.S. Highway 2 six times before it finally crossed, indicating a high level of anxiety and caution. In that study, we recorded thousands of crossings by moose, red fox, and coyotes (respectively) and hundreds by deer and fisher. Less than 40 bobcat crossings were recorded.

While roads may deter bobcat movement or cause deaths, cliff and ledge habitat appears to draw them in, providing refuge from deep snows in winter as well as human and other activity. Cliffy areas are good places to find signs of bobcats, but the functional role of these areas in bobcat ecology is unknown. Deep, soft, snow is a prime enemy of the bobcat. The bobcat has four times more weight-load per foot as does its more northern cousin, the lynx. This higher foot-load means moving in soft snow costs more energy, which can tip the balance of survival in a tough winter. Snow is the limiting factor that differentiates the bobcat's expansive range from the more northerly, mountainous range of the lynx.

The stealthy and secretive nature of the bobcat makes understanding their ecology and working for their conservation difficult. Your best chance of knowing that there is a bobcat around is when you might cross one's tracks in winter. A few hours spent threading through deep thickets, up wooded slopes, and across frozen marshes will work knowledge of bobcats into your bones and you will have earned your stripes, or in this case, spots.

**Kurt Rinehart (M.S.) is a wildlife biologist specializing in carnivores and landscape ecology and the author of *The Naturalist's Guide to Observing Nature* (Stackpole Books), an ecological primer for amateur naturalists. He is currently working on a guide to North American mammal behavior.**

PHOTO BY MARK ELBROCH