

Bobcats: once extirpated from Iowa, now expanding across the state

Having previously been extirpated from Iowa, the bobcat re-populated Iowa from the neighboring states of Missouri, Nebraska, and Kansas. In 2013, biologists estimated that 2000 to 3000 individuals lived in Iowa,¹ mostly in the southern-most counties of the state. By 2018, the bobcats were expanding into northeast Iowa and into central Iowa. The population is still expanding and dispersing across the state.

Although the bobcat has extended its range, there appear to be counties in the state where the bobcat has not fully populated the area, including northeast Iowa and north central Iowa. Increased harvesting pressure may stunt the expansion of the bobcat into those areas.

The hunting and trapping season for bobcats runs from early November through late January. There are no overall quotas for the maximum number of bobcats that can be harvested in a season, however the harvest is restricted to certain counties, mainly in southern and western Iowa. The Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) sets maximum limits for number of bobcats that an individual can harvest in a season. Each person will be able to harvest a maximum of three bobcat; however there are restrictions set for each county on how many bobcats each person can harvest in that county.²

Biologists have no recent estimate of the number of bobcats living in Iowa. Without that, it is difficult to set appropriate harvest levels. A high unsustainable level of harvest will result in the population being extirpated a second time. If there is an over-harvest, the bobcat population may have difficulty compensating and sustaining its population. The market for furs is variable. When prices paid for furs increase, the Department of Natural Resources faces pressure to increase the number of bobcats that can be harvested. Making matters worse, coyotes, a natural predator of bobcats, have been increasing their populations in Iowa.



Photo courtesy National Park Service



Photo courtesy National Park Service

¹ Dr. William Clark, Iowa State University ecology professor and expert on the Iowa bobcats, was interviewed on the Iowa Public Radio show Talk of Iowa on April 10, 2013. The interview can be found at <http://iowapublicradio.org/post/bobcats-are-back>

² Check with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources for more details on the hunting-trapping season for bobcats.

The trapping history is variable from year to year, as shown in the table below. The bobcat's on-going population is fragile and could easily result in over-harvest and extirpation if adequate and proper monitoring is not pursued.

Trapping season	Number of bobcat harvested	Notes
2013 – 2014	978	The 2013-2014 season resulted in harvesting approximately one-fourth to one-third of the estimated living bobcats, after the DNR removed the season quota for the number of bobcats that could be harvested.
2014 -2015	706	
2015 – 2016	535	
2016 – 2017	591	
2017 – 2018	819	
2018 – 2019	678	The DNR staff reporting receiving 10 to 15 nuisance complaints related to bobcats (such as raiding chickens and appearing in yards).
2019-2020	1160	
2020-2021	980	
2021-2022	970	

Policy Recommendations

In 2019, the Department of Natural Resources proposed increases in the bag limits for each harvester. With that, the DNR must closely monitor the population of bobcats, to ensure that population levels remain high and that the bobcat can continue expanding its range across the state.

The Iowa Chapter supports a sustainable harvest of bobcats. To that end, the Chapter supports funding continued scientific studies on the bobcat population, in order to better determine if the season and bag limits on bobcats should be reduced, so that the bobcats are not extirpated from the state a second time.

Unsustainable hunting and trapping will cause the bobcat to be exterminated a second time. With sustainable hunting and trapping regulations, the bobcat will remain in Iowa.



Photo courtesy National Park Service

Conclusion

For over a decade, the Iowa Chapter of the Sierra Club has been demanding that the Iowa Department of Natural Resources set appropriate limits on the bobcat harvest to avoid over-harvest. We have been successful, given that the population has been expanding across the state. At the same time, we need to remain vigilant.