



Wildlife Education and Rehabilitation Center
P.O. Box 1105, Morgan Hill, CA 95038-1105
Telephone & fax: (408) 779-WERC (9372)
Email: werc@werc-ca.org Website: www.werc-ca.org

PROCEDURES for BOBCAT REHABILITATION

DISCUSSION. *Lynx Rufus* is a mammalian predator at home in a variety of terrestrial habitats, rarely seen by humans but sometimes living within sight of the suburbs. Bobcats are solitary creatures. Their home range is determined by the amount of prey available in an area. Most bobcats delivered for rehabilitation are injured or orphaned due to human activity involving automobile, domestic dog, weapon, traps, or secondary poisoning. Some kittens are taken unwittingly from the protection of their home by humans who stumble upon them thinking they've been orphaned. Some are delivered to a wildlife center but some are illegally raised as pets. These 'pet' bobcats are often abandoned by the 'owners' when the animal reaches maturity and displays wild and dangerous characteristics or a voracious appetite.

SCREENING CALLS. Calls concerning bobcats are primarily sightings. Inform the public that bobcats often live in proximity with people and the bobcat diet is mainly rodents. For more information read the paper *Living on the Fringe* by Gary Turbak (see '*RESOURCES*').

RESPONDING. When a call is received concerning an injured bobcat, refer the caller to the local Animal Control or Humane Society for pick up and delivery to your center or send out your trained rescue team. Do not send an untrained person to rescue a bobcat. Inform the caller that the bobcat is especially dangerous because it is injured and frightened and instruct the caller to stay a safe distance from the animal. The caller may keep an eye on the injured animal from a safe distance, but inform the caller that if the bobcat moves off, do not follow it. Be sure to get the caller's contact information. If the bobcat is found to have rabies, the caller must be notified to contact his physician concerning his exposure.

BOBCAT RESTRAINT. Full-grown bobcats are capable of killing adult deer (*Wild Neighbors The Humane Approach to Living With Wildlife* by The Humane Society of the United States), therefore, all rehabilitators who handle bobcats are required to receive training in large animal restraint. Knowledge of the proper use of a catchpole is absolutely necessary to the safety of bobcat and handler. Contact your local Animal Control or Humane Society to arrange a class in large animal restraint and the use of a catchpole. Bobcats are rabies vectors so all pertinent precautions must be observed.

BOBCAT ENCLOSURE. All enclosures must meet or exceed the IWRC/NWRA standard Guidelines. For information on the proper shelter and temperatures for infant bobcats, please refer to PC Hanes' *Bobcat Rehabilitation: Hand Rearing Felis Rufus* (see 'RESOURCES').

The weaned bobcat must be housed in an outdoor enclosure that replicates a natural environment with plenty of exercise room and hiding space. A double door entryway on the bobcat enclosure is mandatory and it must be secured with a lock. For handler and animal safety it is strongly suggested that the bobcat enclosure be at least eight feet wide, twelve feet long and six feet high. A covered area that is protected from the weather is required as well as an area that receives sunshine. The enclosure must have two water sources. Provide natural vegetation such as fresh tree branches and logs for climbing to shelves that are mounded with thick vegetation. Change all the vegetation as it loses its freshness. Set up a variety of bushy hiding places on ground level also. A large, door less kennel hidden by branches in a corner or on a shelf adds another safe shelter choice for the bobcat. Secure a perch in a location where the cat can look out on a remote area and observe birds and other wildlife species. Always check often to be certain that logs and shelves are secure. Check for dangling ropes, wires or anything that the bobcat can become entangled in. A growing bobcat will enthusiastically pounce on and attack everything in its enclosure; therefore, bushes will need to be fluffed up often.

Walls must be constructed with safety in mind. Solid walls on the bottom half of the enclosure protect the bobcat and give it a sense of security and a visual barrier. The upper half of the walls and the roof must be constructed with heavy gauge wire mesh to provide openness and sunshine. Attach shades that can be rolled up or down on the outside of the wire walls. These can be rolled down when more sunscreen or visual protection is necessary or rolled up when more light is needed. On the side of the enclosure that receives the heaviest wind and rain, walls and roof must be constructed of solid wood.

An enclosure that has two habitat areas divided by a pass-through with a removable door is very useful. When maintenance must be done on the enclosure, the bobcat can be closed into one habitat side and the door put in place. The cat is then out of the way and less exposed to a stressful situation. When the maintenance is complete the pass-through door can be taken out of the enclosure and the bobcat has its full space back.

Placement of doors for human entry and exit must be carefully considered when constructing a new enclosure. The door should never be in the bobcat's line of escape. If the animal feels cornered when a human enters, it may attack out of fear and self-defense. Give the bobcat an avenue of escape away from the entry. The avenue of escape need not be actual. It can be a thick bush on the floor or on a shelf, but it must be opposite the human entrance. An enclosure that is not safe for the handler must not be used to house a bobcat.

The substrate must consist of natural earth, gravel, grass or tan bark. A bobcat buries its feces so there must be an area with loose sand or tanbark. The flooring under the substrate must protect the bobcat from predators digging in and from the bobcat getting out. The IWRC/NWRA *Minimum Standards for Wildlife Rehabilitation* states that a cement floor and foundation or one half inch galvanized hardware cloth buried under the cage floor and extending two feet up the walls may be considered adequate protective design.

Like housecats, bobcats are curious and they are amazing contortionists. If there is a way to get in trouble, the bobcat will find it. Keep this in mind as you do a final safety check of your enclosure before admitting a bobcat.

INITIAL HEALTH CARE. Within 72 hours of acquisition, the bobcat must be seen by a veterinarian that is familiar with and willing to work with the species. If this is not possible, the bobcat must be transferred to a licensed facility that has access to such a veterinarian. This is critical with all bobcats and especially with neonates. The veterinarian will determine if the bobcat has a significant chance to recover and be released. If the veterinarian determines the animal will not have a chance at a normal life in the wild, the bobcat must be euthanized. The bobcat must be treated for external as well as internal parasites. The veterinarian will determine the correct immunization schedule, prescribe appropriate medications, and the return appointment schedule. The veterinarian or his staff will check to be sure the bobcat has not been de-clawed, de-fanged or neutered by someone who may have illegally held it in captivity and later released it. If this is the case, the bobcat must be euthanized.

CONTINUING CARE. A daily log must be kept to record the bobcat's progress. This will include the date, the animal's general appearance, behavior, food intake, medications when applicable, other observations and caretaker's signature.

The bobcat enclosure must be kept clean. Feces and spoiled food must be removed on a daily basis. Any unusual appearance in the feces such as consistency, blood or parasites will then be noticed, entered in the log, diagnosed, and treated. Fecal analyses must be run on a regular basis: upon acquisition, again after treatment, and at least a week before a planned release. If the bobcat is under care for an extended period, fecal analyses should be run periodically.

BOBCAT DIET. For specific details on bobcat diet contact the Wildlife Education and Rehabilitation Center (see *RESOURCES*).

The newborn bobcat should be offered formula by bottle every three hours. The amount will change as its weight increases. Poached chicken and a dead mouse should be offered as well as the formula at three weeks, although the bobcat may not accept the meat right away. Sprinkle a mammal multivitamin on the diet. By five weeks the kitten should be eating soft and semi-solid foods and gradually weaned from the formula. When the young cat learns to consume the more natural rodents, discontinue the chicken. Continue to sprinkle vitamins on the mice. As the bobcat increases in weight, his food intake must increase proportionately. To accomplish this, keep track of all foods given and foods left uneaten. As the bobcat grows, provide it with larger mice, rats, or other prey it may encounter in its natural habitat. To trigger the growing bobcat's hunting instinct, introduce live prey regularly. Never feed a bobcat pet food. A bobcat will roll in, chew on, and possibly ingest fresh vegetation. Provide a fresh handful of native green weeds on a weekly basis. Do not give any poisonous plants or plants that have sharp stickers.

Several weeks before release, the bobcat must be put on a live-kill diet. Be careful that you don't introduce fleas when you introduce live prey into the bobcat's enclosure. The bobcat must be able to sustain its weight strictly on live kill. Once it has consistently demonstrated skill at hunting and killing, the bobcat can once again be fed the old diet of dead rodents or other prey animals. This will ensure it's in good flesh for its upcoming release.

RAISING A NON-HABITUATED SINGLE BOBCAT KITTEN

DISCUSSION. Most bobcat kittens are born in April or May after 60-63 days gestation. There may be a second litter born later in the year, usually around August or September. The litters average two-three kittens, which are cared for by the mother bobcat. The den may be in any protected spot such as beneath a rocky outcropping or in dense underbrush. The mother bobcat nurses the kittens for about two months, gradually getting them accustomed to eating solid meat. When they are completely weaned she starts taking them out on the hunt with her. This is a critical time when the young ones imitate the mother cat and learn survival skills that will determine their future. Emancipation comes after the age of six months and the young bobcats disperse out of the mother bobcat's home range.

THE ORPHANED BOBCAT. If you are rehabilitating two or more bobcat kittens that can be kept in the same enclosure, they will teach each other the skills needed to survive in the wild. In the act of play they will stalk and hunt and chase each other up limbs and leap across bushes to pin their playmates to the ground. They will develop strong muscles and hunting instincts.

Raising a single bobcat kitten is much more involved because there are no siblings or mother to teach it survival skills. Furthermore, bobcat kittens are known to habituate on human caregivers, thereby making them a potential nuisance and dangerous animal when released in the wild. Habituated bobcats may also be driven off and possibly killed by their wild counterparts because the habituated ones are different and the wild bobcats sense it.

In 1994 the Wildlife Education and Rehabilitation Center in Morgan Hill, CA developed a non-habituating technique for raising single orphaned bobcat kittens. The technique involves a team of human surrogate mothers in full-body bobcat costume who take turns interacting with the bobcat kitten to teach it survival skills. The surrogates may be male or female since the bobcat cannot discern the difference through the disguise.

The costume completely covers the human body so that no skin is exposed. No person is allowed to touch the bobcat with his or her bare skin. No human scents are worn including deodorants and perfumes. The whole costume, Kevlar gloves, hair, and shoes are rubbed down with wild herbs to further mask any human scent. There are no human sounds emitted while in costume: no speech, laughter, coughing, etc. The costume is stored with herbs and is not laundered until after the bobcat's release.

One of the team of surrogate mothers spends at least one hour each day with the kitten. The bobcat looks forward to this time of social interaction with the surrogate and may greet her with purrs and climb in her lap. The surrogate mother spends the time crawling about on hands and knees, never in upright human posture. The surrogate teaches the kitten to chase a twig around thereby encouraging it to stalk and leap and climb: a prerequisite to later lessons in live hunting. She teaches the kitten to hide when human voices are heard near the enclosure. Play gets gradually rougher as the kitten gets older and the surrogate mom rolls the young bobcat around with her Kevlar glove and 'fights' back. The surrogate mother also spends time caressing and grooming the kitten.

Only de-scented playthings such as teddy bear, rubber snake, and fur type rug may be left in the bobcat's enclosure. Several long wardrobe type mirrors, placed horizontally should be secured strategically around the enclosure. These enable the orphan to become accustomed to the image of another real bobcat.

The bobcat kitten must have no positive human contact! Negative human contact must be enforced during the times when the kitten is captured for a veterinarian visit. At this time, a trained catch team in normal human attire and with unrestricted talking enters the bobcat's enclosure. The kitten should show fear. Follow through on your capture and restraint plan and do not attempt to gentle the bobcat. Be aware that in this situation the kitten is dangerous and will lash out through the bars of its kennel door at anyone within reach. When the bobcat is returned to its home enclosure, it will feel safe again and unchanged in its relationship with the surrogate mom. This process of negative reinforcement is very important to ensure the wild animal will avoid humans after it's released.

For further details on raising a single, non-habituated bobcat kitten, contact the Wildlife Education and Rehabilitation Center (see '*RESOURCES*').

BOBCAT RELEASE. In the weeks prior to its release the bobcat must display fear of humans, it must be able to hunt and kill its own food, it must have a clean bill of health, and it must be at least six months old. Visits by the surrogate team are now gradually tapered off. Contact the Department of Fish and Game for information on ear tagging. Tagging is done one to two weeks prior to release to give the ear time to heal. The release of young bobcats must take place mid morning with a good weather forecast for the release date and following two days. Older rehabilitated bobcats can be released during the day or at dusk. A bobcat is normally taken back and released within a three mile radius of where it was found. The release site must be coordinated with your local Fish and Game Biologist, and permission must be obtained from the landowner. Check the release criteria as stated in the *Memorandum of Understanding with the California Department of Fish and Game* as well as your state and local applicable agencies.

CONCLUSIONS. This information is a basic outline and was developed to be used with the resources listed in the final section. Taking on the rehabilitation of a bobcat is a major commitment of time, finances and resources. Anyone considering it must first thoroughly research the natural history and behavior of the species. Acquire and study all the literature listed in the following section of '*RESOURCES*'. Furthermore, there must be a veterinarian available who is familiar with and willing to work with the species. It is also imperative anyone considering handling a bobcat contact at least three experienced bobcat rehabilitators for guidance and assistance. Listings can be found in the Specialties Index in the back of the NWRA and IWRC Membership Directories.

RESOURCES.

The Wildlife Education and Rehabilitation Center in Morgan Hill, CA raised a single bobcat from one day old to release and has detailed bobcat rehabilitation logs available that have not been published as of this printing. Contact them for information and assistance.
(408) 779-9372 werc@werc-ca.org

PC Hanes, BS, MS Zoology
BOBCAT REHABILITATION: (Hand-Rearing Felis rufus) 1998
Central Texas Wildlife Institute, Inc.
HCR 64 Box 30
Hamilton, Texas 76531-9202
(254) 372-3978
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Evelyn Davis, W.E.R.C. Wildlife Technician, January 2003