

SHOWCASE SPECIES: WEST

CANADA LYNX IN COLORADO



IDFG

The Issue

The Canada lynx was virtually wiped out of the Colorado mountains in the early part of the 20th century due to a variety of factors, including unregulated use of poisons, habitat destruction and unregulated hunting. Evidence of individual animals continued to crop up in later years, however, in the form of scattered sightings in mountain areas. The last lynx sighting prior to recovery work in the 1990s occurred near Vail in 1973, although tracks unsubstantiated by biologists were reported there in 1991. A state-run reintroduction program begun in 1999 has restored the threatened cat to parts of its range as part of a design for the species' recovery in Colorado.

Natural History

Although commonly called the Canada lynx, this 20 to 30 pound cat with a bobbed tail and tufted ears occurred historically throughout the northern reaches of North America as well as northern Eurasia. The lynx resembles the bobcat, though the lynx is generally larger, with gray rather than the more typically reddish fur of the bobcat. Its large, furry feet adapt it to walking or running on snow. In Canada its primary prey is the snowshoe hare, a species that follows regular 10-year cycles of alternating low and high populations.

When hare numbers are up, Canada lynx populations tend to increase, and when hares die off, cat numbers dwindle too.

In Colorado, the lynx prey base includes other types of rabbits as well as squirrels and other rodents. Biologists suspect that this diversity in the cat's diet may make Colorado populations more stable than those in Canada.

Listing

Colorado listed the lynx as endangered in 1973, and it was federally listed in 2000 as threatened in 14 states, including Colorado. However, when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service designated critical habitat for the lynx in 2006, habitat in Colorado was not included.

Management

The Colorado Division of Wildlife has led the campaign to restore lynx to the state, with encouragement by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Recovery work started in 1999 with the release of lynx captured primarily in British Columbia and the Yukon. By 2006, more than 200 Canada lynx had been reintroduced to the San Juan Mountains in southwest Colorado. In the first year, four of five released animals starved to death, so biologists switched to delaying release for up to 90 days after the cats' arrival in Colorado, giving them time to acclimate and to put on weight. This procedure has reduced death from starvation significantly. In the past two or three years, the real evidence of success has been reproduction among released animals. In 2005, 50 kittens were born in the wild. In 2006, that number dropped to only 11, a decline biologists are still trying to understand. In any event, the Colorado recovery program shows evidence of having established a breeding population in areas from which the lynx was extirpated years ago. A more definitive evaluation should be available by 2009, but determining if the overall program is successful will take longer.



EYEWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

Funding

Lynx recovery funding for Colorado has come from Division of Wildlife license fees and from the Great Outdoors Colorado Trust Fund, a program that uses state lottery funds to provide grants to state wildlife projects. The recovery program also received about \$300,000 in private donations, primarily from the Vail Ski Corporation and from Turner Endangered Species Fund. In addition, the Wildlife Heritage Foundation of Colorado, created in 1989 to raise funds for Colorado wildlife, has worked to obtain money for the project and in November 2006 presented the state wildlife agency with \$250,000 for lynx recovery work. The Colorado Wildlife Federation also has backed the project, lobbying the state legislature and the Colorado Wildlife Commission for support.

“But the truth of the matter is that Congress should be providing the Service with the funds needed for lynx recovery,” says John Kostyack, director of Wildlife Conservation Campaigns at the National Wildlife Federation. “Progress would be made much more quickly with this species if U.S. Fish and Wildlife had adequate funds for lynx recovery in Colorado.”

Funding from all government sources for lynx recovery nationwide ranks the cat at 61 out of 1,311 species, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service fiscal year 2004 report (the most recent available) to Congress, *Federal and State Endangered and Threatened Species Expenditures*.^{*} Total funding from all government sources that year for lynx recovery nationwide was about \$3 million, with \$772,000 coming from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

THREATS FROM GLOBAL WARMING



Global warming poses a long-term threat if the cat’s high-elevation habitat heats up. Lynx are adapted to moving across snow, with their large, heavily furred feet buoying them up almost like snowshoes.

But as climate warms, diminished snowfall will allow other predators, such as coyotes and bobcats, to compete more effectively against the lynx, which already faces tough survival challenges: In Canada, 70 to 80 percent of lynx do not make it past three years old.

Global warming in the West is a burgeoning threat to lynx habitat and, therefore, to lynx survival. Warmer, drier conditions due to global warming have caused a four-fold increase in the number of major wildfires in western forests and a six-fold increase in the area of forest burned since the mid-1980s. Scientists predict that the overall area of acreage burned by wildfires will double in size across 11 western states between 2070 and 2100.

Local Contacts

Steve Torbit, National Wildlife Federation Rocky Mountain Natural Resource Center, 303-786-8001; Colorado Wildlife Federation, 303-987-0400; Great Outdoors Colorado Trust Fund, 303-863-7522

Other Threats

Although the Endangered Species Act bans the killing of lynx and requires road planners to consider lynx safety needs when planning new highways, immediate key threats to lynx recovery include road kill and illegal shooting.

^{*} The U.S. Fish and Wildlife *Federal and State Endangered and Threatened Species Expenditures* report incorporates subjective estimates provided by regulated entities without any independent verification and without effort to segregate Endangered Species Act expenditures from other related expenditures. However, for most listed species, no other funding data is available.