

Bobcat Tour



Last week a bobcat took me on a tour of a part of my backyard that I have never visited before. The cat led me to an area where porcupines had created a Japanese garden of bonsai hemlocks around a bedrock knob. She took me along the brook that gurgled through

caverns of snow with icy stalactites. I lost her tracks in the twilight on the rocky summit of a hill I had never been on before.

At only a few points did the cat pause, usually just for a moment, and then she would change direction slightly. Once, however, she whirled, and because I was following tracks, rather than the cat herself, I can only guess that she was lunging at the fox that had picked up her trail several hundred yards back and was walking directly in her footprints. At that point the fox turned and headed in a different direction.

Unless you're really interested in the bobcat's point of view, I don't recommend them as tour guides. This bobcat led me through stands of young spruce so thick that once or twice I thought I might really be stuck. These were places that also attracted snowshoe hare, and while the bobcat did not pause to hunt, I think she might have been receptive to opportunity.

Of all the wild creatures that live in my backyard, bobcats are among the most elusive. I have seen them only a few times, and then only brief glimpses, so it was a treat to follow the cat's tracks and begin to learn about her life. I have learned a bit about bobcats by following tracks, but the best learning experience I had was a day I spent in the field with Alcott Smith. Alcott is a keen observer,

and has spent most of his life in the wildest parts of the northeast. A retired veterinarian, his wry demeanor thinly veils a passion for wildlife and an enthusiasm for sharing his knowledge and experiences.

On the day in question, I met a Bonnyvale group in West Brattleboro in the early morning, and we headed to the other side of the state to meet Alcott in a bit of bobcat paradise. A portion of central Vermont's western boundary is defined by the Poultney River emptying into the southern tip of Lake Champlain at East Bay. To reach the lake, the river is forced to jog south and then north again by intransigent rock thrusting up dramatically from the Champlain Valley. This rock, Bald Mountain, is protected by the Nature Conservancy. It provides prime habitat for two of Vermont's rare species, the peregrine falcon and the timber rattlesnake.

Out on snowshoes with Alcott, we picked up fisher tracks and followed them into an open brushy area. Here we found the winding troughs of turkeys in the soft snow. In one spot the turkeys had trampled down a large area. The source of their interest in that site mystified me, but Alcott picked up a large clump of burdock and described how in that regions turkeys have developed a fancy feeding behavior. They ball together individual burrs and then roll them around with their beaks, pecking up the little seeds as they dislodge. The seeds are low in nutritional value, so this is a hard-times feeding behavior.

We passed through a hemlock grove and investigated snow shelters where grouse had spent the night, the path of a porcupine, and tufts of cottontail rabbit fur, each a sign of bobcat prey.

At the base of an impressive cliff we explored a pile of talus. The hemlocks there contorted in ways that indicated that they have provided winter food for many generations of porcupines. There we saw tracks showing where a bobcat leapt from rock to rock. Here, beneath the boulders, Alcott explained, porcupines and bobcats often shelter in close proximity. Bobcats are one of the few predators willing to tangle with a porcupine, but judiciously. They prefer those weakened by disease or from injuries sustained in a fall from a tree (not an uncommon

occurrence).

We soon found we were not only at the base of a cliff, but on top of one. Lake Champlain's East Bay cattail marsh stretched out below us. On the scramble down, Alcott brought us to a couple of niches in the ledge where we found signs that the bobcats survey the world from these spots. On one we find the bleached bones of a hapless rabbit. As we pause, a large, dark bird hovers nearby, as it reels against the lowering sun we see the white tail of a mature bald eagle.

Once down at the edge of the wetland, bobcat sign was abundant. In that year, with a dearth of the cottontails that often sustain bobcats, the cats took advantage of a surfeit of muskrats. The snow through the cattails had been beaten into trails by the leathery soles of many muskrat feet. In places the serpentine drag marks of their tails was evident between the paw prints. Farther along, in the gloaming, we could just make out an impression in the snow. It told the tale of how the bobcat waited beneath the cover of a leaning maple. It showed her front legs braced, alert. It showed hind legs poised to spring.

Cattail down was caught in the rocks, and grasses. It twisted around twigs. It had been drenched by many storms and dried by winter sun. Not five feet from the cat prints, tufts of dark brown fur mingled with the white of the cattail. Muskrat had become bobcat.