

'Harvest' in Arizona averages 66 fatalistic bobcats daily

Today 66 Arizona bobcats will be "harvested." Many will be taken in this valley, prime habitat.

The cats were caught in leg traps last night, while prowling for rabbits, wood rats, other wild game.

Each cat fought for only a short time after the steel closed on its leg. Maybe five minutes of tearing up the ground, straining against the chain. Then each cat lay down to wait.

Unlike coyotes and deer, who jerk again and again to the end of the chain when caught in a trap, bobcats are known for their fatalistic acceptance of that cold grip.

Men running their trap lines are finding the cats right now.

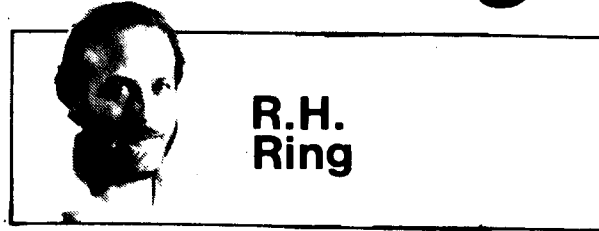
Bobcats will resist when approached by man. They will move to the farthest reach of the chain, then face the hated man with hisses and growls and lashing claws.

Each cat will be shot in the head, neatly, with a .22-caliber bullet.

Each one will be thrown in the back of a truck, or otherwise stashed, until the trapper has time to peel away the skin with a knife.

The hides will be sold for as much as \$300. A hundred and a half is the average. Bobcats are worth more, in this measurement, than any other animal common in the Southwest.

In the desert, cat colors tend to run lighter — perhaps as an adaption to the intense sunlight — and that makes



the pelts more valuable. The fur on the bobcat's belly is the prize. Dark black spots, irregular on a pure white background, create an unmatched surreal beauty.

Most of the bobcat bellies will be shipped to Europe, to be made into fur coats. As many as 35 bobcats go into a floor-length coat. A top price for such a coat is \$100,000. The average is perhaps \$30,000.

The buyers are also in Europe, where middle-class consumers invest in fur coats instead of houses or cars. The affluent, of course, are always in the market. In this way, the New World continues to supply wants of the Old.

Some cat coats are shipped back to this country, and are bought by the affluent here. Fur shows in Madison Square Garden and Las Vegas casinos help prod demand.

Bobcat coats are not valued for their warmth or function. Fur from the desert has no great insulation quality. Rather, the consumption of bobcat is a matter of fashion alone.

Commentary

Until a decade ago, the bobcat was not so fashionable. Bobcats were a "trash animal" to trappers, worth maybe \$25 apiece.

Ironically, restrictions on harvesting other spotted cats — tigers, jaguars, cheetahs — concentrated such exploitation on the bobcat.

Demand, and price, soared. An excellent bobcat pelt fetched \$600. The price fell last year, when export of pelts was temporarily banned.

Some people who believe animals have rights went to court over it. But they lost in October, and the ban was lifted. It's likely exports will begin again, soon. So the pelts stored in warehouses, frozen, will be put on the market.

A record number of bobcats were trapped here last season, and a comparable "harvest" is expected this four-month season, ending Feb. 28.

Eight thousand to 9,000 bobcats, an average of 66 or more a day, will die in traps.

The state's game and fish experts say that is no threat. They estimate 40,000 bobcats live in Arizona.

It costs \$50 for a resident license to trap bobcat. So the state makes \$100,000 off the 2,000 men who do it.

A full-time trapper, taking bobcat and fox — a "bread and butter animal" at \$30 a pelt — might earn \$20,000 in the four-month season, minus considerable expenses.

The work is dawn to dusk. A trap line is usually strung out over rugged miles, and is checked by vehicle.

Last year one man got 62 cats.

Despite their abundance and proximity to humans, bobcats cause no one trouble. They are rarely seen. They pad through the washes, desert and mountains from dusk to dawn. The night is theirs.

No bigger than a honcho tomcat, they are fierce predators, known to kill turkeys, young deer or even a very occasional javelina.

Sometimes they stalk ducks swimming on ponds, fascinated, trying to figure a way to get one.

In the way of the wild, bobcats themselves can become prey for other predators — great horned owls, hawks and coyotes — in battles of tooth and claw, beak and talon.

But it is steel that is the bobcat's greatest enemy, far and away. Perhaps bobcats lie down and accept the trap because they know killing so well.

Only man is better at it. Only man makes it an industry.

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