

## Canada Lynx

### *Lynx canadensis*

The feline face, black ear tufts, and under-chin facial ruffs of the Canada Lynx create one of the most striking images of the boreal forest. The northernmost member of the cat family, the lynx is the only wild feline with a range that extends beyond the Arctic Circle.

The Canada Lynx has adapted to northern regions by focusing almost exclusively on the Snowshoe Hares as a source of food. Waiting quietly in the willows beside a well-trodden rabbit path, or searching slowly along the edges of a spruce-hemmed clearing, a lynx displays the graceful stealth of the solitary feline hunter.

### DISTRIBUTION

Lynx inhabit the entire Yukon with the exception of the Arctic coastal plain. During population highs, they are scattered in fairly large numbers over the territory, occupying coniferous-deciduous forests of White Spruce, Lodgepole Pine, aspen, and willow.

Because lynx are so dependent on Snowshoe Hares, fluctuations in hare populations (an eight to eleven year cycle) cause lynx numbers to rise and fall also. These cycles affect the distribution of lynx in Yukon. When hare populations crash, lynx numbers go through a three to five year low period. During these times, the surviving lynx range over greater areas in search of scarce food. They may even wander over one thousand kilometres away from their original home ranges. When hare populations crest, lynx numbers peak in the summer of the next year. At these times, large numbers of lynx are ranging over smaller areas.

### CHARACTERISTICS

The lynx's short, compact body is insulated with thick, buff coloured under fur and long, grey guard hairs which give it a silver sheen along its back. The tail is small and black tipped.

In winter, its long legs and unusually large, well-furred, snowshoe-like feet allow the lynx to move over deep snow with ease. The stereoscopic vision of the cat helps it detect movement and judge distances when hunting the Snowshoe Hare.

Mature male lynx weigh between eight and eleven kilograms, while females are slightly smaller.

### LIFE HISTORY

Through the darkest and coldest part of the year, sometimes in temperatures lower than -50 degrees Celsius, a lynx roams over its home range in search of Snowshoe Hares. Hares constitute 90 to 95 percent of the lynx's winter diet when these small mammals are plentiful, and a lynx may consume an average of one a day.

To conserve energy in cold temperatures, lynx spend much of the time bedded down, and often hunt using a stationary ambush tactic. When a hare passes by, the lynx leaps from its hiding place, and after a short chase of not more than ten bounds, it pins the hare under its forepaws and kills it instantly with a bite to the neck. Another hunting method involves walking in a zigzag pattern through areas where hares are present in an attempt to flush them out of hiding.

When few hares can be found, lynx try to survive on grouse, ptarmigan and the few small mammals that are active and accessible in winter. Red Squirrels are the main prey of lynx in Yukon when times are lean, and they may make up a third of the lynx diet by weight during the low phase of the cycle.

Ordinarily single and unsociable, adult lynx form temporary bonds during the mating period of March and April. The young, which may number up to eight to a litter when hares are abundant, are born from May to June under brush-piles or tree roots in remote areas of dense spruce forests or old burned areas. At twelve weeks old, the kittens are weaned and able to move away from the safety of the den. They are now open to attack by wolves, Wolverines, and even eagles.

The ability of lynx to successfully raise their young is closely tied to Snowshoe Hare abundance. Although adult lynx continue to breed when Snowshoe Hares are scarce, fewer kittens are born and fewer survive. But as hares become more plentiful, lynx begin to breed more successfully, litter sizes increase, and fewer young perish.

Young lynx spend the short northern summer sharpening their hunting skills. Teamed up with their mother, they fan out to flush Snowshoe Hares from the willows.

Lynx forage throughout the long daylight hours of Yukon summers, but avoid periods of bright sunlight. With small animals abounding, the lynx diet includes more voles, mice, ground squirrels and beaver in the summer. Juicy young sedges and grasses are also eaten and, depending on hare abundance, lynx may scavenge off the carcasses of wolf-killed Moose or caribou. A few lynx may add variety to their diets by feeding on salmon carcasses later in the season.

Before the first snow flies, usually in late October, young lynx have attained their adult pelage. With their lighter, less dense summer coats replaced by thick winter pelts, they are ready for the cold. Their hunting skills are still developing though, and most young lynx spend their first winter travelling and foraging with their littermates and mother. By the end of the winter, they are ready to leave their mother and establish their own home ranges, but some female kits carve out their new homes within the range they were born in.

## LYNX AND PEOPLE

Lynx fur was traditionally used by First Nations people for ceremonial cloaks and robes. A ritual treatment of the carcass ensured that the animal's spirit was content.

To Yukon trapping industry, the lynx has always been one of the most valuable furbearers. Thick winter pelts of lynx from the Yukon command top prices on the international market, and this can make lynx management a difficult task. Trappers and government harvest managers work together to ensure the

long term health of lynx populations. When lynx numbers are down, trappers are expected to cooperate by cutting back on their trapping effort. This makes sense in the long run, because the more animals that survive through a population low, the quicker and higher lynx numbers will rebound.

#### VIEWING OPPORTUNITIES

Prospective lynx viewers and photographers should first look for Snowshoe Hares. Where they are found, lynx are likely to be present. When hare populations are high or rising, the opportunities to observe lynx will be greater. Look for the large, round tracks in the snow in a near single-file pattern. Lynx are quite curious and will often dash for cover before turning to watch. If you see a lynx bolt for cover, note where it went and wait quietly. It may reappear again.

River travellers occasionally see lynx hunting along the shorelines or sitting under riverside stands of spruce. A canoe, which the lynx may mistake for a floating tree, can be an excellent viewing platform.