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The Hawk Eye

Booming bobcat numbers are threatening other wildlife

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"That's just God's creation right there, staring you in the face."

Mike Buster used those words to describe a picture of a bobcat he captured in February with a digital game camera on his rural Mediapolis farm. But from what Buster has observed over the past few years, the once-protected species may now be overabundant in southeast Iowa.

"I am an animal lover, I'm a hunter. I was a trapper, a fisherman, a conservationist," Buster said. "But what I've seen at our farm is that these cats, since they've become more populated, are killing a lot of wildlife." And Buster isn't alone in his sentiments.

In January, Rep. Richard Arnold, R-Russell, introduced a bill that eventually would create an open season on bobcats in Iowa, something he says is necessary because the predators are killing too many wild turkeys. While the measure since has died, it would have increased the annual quota from 200 last year to 1,000 this year, 2,000 in 2010 and no limit in 2011. Buster said he doesn't want to eliminate the bobcat population, but he would like to see a higher quota. The current bag limit for bobcats is one per season per licensed fur harvester, though they can be taken only in the southern two tiers of counties in Iowa and the western Loess Hills region of the state. The season begins Nov. 1 and continues through Jan. 31, or until the quota is reached. Last year, the quota was reached by Nov. 19.

Rough estimates from the Iowa Department of Natural Resources put the state's bobcat population at about 2,500, although some biologists believe the number could be twice that. Buster believes the DNR is greatly underestimating the number of bobcats, and it needs a more accurate count. According to Todd Gosselink, a DNR forest wildlife research biologist, bobcats have increased considerably in southeast Iowa over the last three years.

"Bobcat numbers in Missouri have grown substantially, and they're likely just moving up from there into Iowa," said Gosselink, who is leading a study with the DNR and Iowa State University. Gosselink estimates the bobcat population had been growing 12 percent each year. Since regulated harvest seasons began in 2007, the growth rate has probably decreased to between 6 and 8 percent. Female bobcats usually have two to three kittens per year. Gosselink said based on those figures, the quota could probably be doubled to equal zero percent population growth, but that would deter the expansion of the species.

"We want to be conservative in our quota, because there are a lot of other places in Iowa farther north that want to see bobcats move into their area," Gosselink said. "If you get rid of the quota, say it's unlimited, then you're definitely going to impact the repopulation of bobcats throughout Iowa and probably see a reduction in southern Iowa, too."

While bobcat sightings in Iowa were infrequent between the 1940s and '80s, the population increased enough by 2003 for the Iowa DNR to remove them from threatened status. "This is a great comeback of bobcats in Iowa. But if we say harvest as many as you want, well, that's what got us into trouble in the first place," Gosselink said.

While Arnold contends the cats are threatening the turkey population, Gosselink hasn't found that to be the case in his research. "Out of 100 bobcat stomachs we looked at, one bobcat stomach had turkey feathers and one had pheasant feathers. It was mostly cottontail rabbits and mice," Gosselink said of the stomachs they examined last fall and winter. He noted bobcats are "opportunists" that take advantage of any prey they can.

Buster said he has seen the cats kill rabbits, squirrels, all kinds of birds, mice, and even two red-tail hawks. He also said the cats often kill more than they can eat. He's seen them kill prey, play with the carcass, then leave it to rot. "People need to understand these cats kill just to kill. That's why they have to be kept under control," Buster said.

Gosselink also said about two-thirds of the bobcats killed during the two harvest seasons Iowa has had so far have been mounted. Bobcat pelts are considered valuable and have been worth between \$80 and \$100. With the state of the economy, he estimated at present their worth to be \$20 to \$40.