

Female lynx prove elusive to researchers

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LOOMIS — Wildlife biologists in Okanogan County closed up a few dozen cages and stopped scouring the high country for Canada lynx tracks this week. Since late January, they captured four lynx and fitted them with new radio collars. Two cats were new to the study and two have been tracked for a year. The collar from a fifth lynx was located by plane just across the Canadian border, and biologists hope to retrieve that soon. It was programmed to fall off its lynx, named Loomis, after one year.



DNR assistant biologist Matt Marsh holds Lander, a male Canada lynx captured near Cougar Creek during the last week of trapping this year for a study of the elusive, high-elevation cats. Marsh, an assistant biologist with the state Department of Natural Resources, released the cat after it was outfitted with ear tags and a collar. (Washington Department of Natural Resources photo)

Gary Koehler, research scientist for the state Department of Fish and Wildlife, who is leading the lynx study, said the data from five lynx will help biologists find better ways to manage the shy cat, listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. They're hoping to learn how soon the cats return to areas that have been burned by fire or logged. The data is particularly critical now, since the 175,000-acre Tripod Fire and other massive fires in recent years burned half of the cat's largest and best habitat in Washington state.

"It's getting a lot closer," said Koehler of the number of animals he'll need to get a true read on what lynx need. "It's kind of like a Gallup Poll. The bigger the sample, the better understanding we can have of what the population is doing." But there's still a major component missing. All of the lynx captured and radio-collared so far are male. The biologists also want to know the habits and movements of female lynx, Koehler said.

"I think they're just more cautious," he said. "Females, they're just really programmed to protect their young," he said, which may prevent them from venturing into a trap, even one baited with fresh, road-killed meat.

Scott Fisher, regional biologist for the state Department of Natural Resources, said he's excited that they won't have to wait until next winter to retrieve some information on the whereabouts of two of the lynx. Last winter, three of the cats were fitted with collars that stored GPS locations. Biologists have to retrieve those collars to get the information. This winter, the collars on two of the cats let them download the information remotely. That means biologists can figure out where the cats were most recently. The researchers can then visit those areas to find out why the lynx might like it.

"We can have a real close look at the habitat, and also maybe do some hare pellet surveys to get an understanding of how many bunnies might be there," Koehler said. Fisher added: "I'm looking forward to the quiet time, to sit down and really dive into that data. We can see how they moved in four-hour intervals across the landscape. It should be pretty fascinating."

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