



Hidden TRACKS

Canada lynx are among the most **MYSTERIOUS** residents of Minnesota's northern forests.

Minnesota's north woods are true wilderness, with dense forests, boggy wetlands, and deep winter snows that have always made it hard for people to enter. But animals know the way, and this realm is full of life. Day and night, through summer's heat and winter's chill, wildlife follow hidden trails through thick stands of trees, around moss-covered boulders, over fallen logs, and across frozen creeks.

Visit the north woods and you might be lucky enough to see a moose, black bear, or porcupine. Perhaps you'll even catch the distant song of howling wolves. But there is an-

other creature wandering these trails, one so rare that few people ever catch a glimpse of it: the Canada lynx.

True to their name, most of these graceful wildcats live in the remote forests of Canada or Alaska. Small populations are also found in several northern states—including Minnesota—and high in the mountains of some western states.

Until about 20 years ago, any lynx spotted in Minnesota were assumed to be visitors, not residents. Now, biologists are revealing a different story: Canada lynx are a small but important part of the wild community in our state.

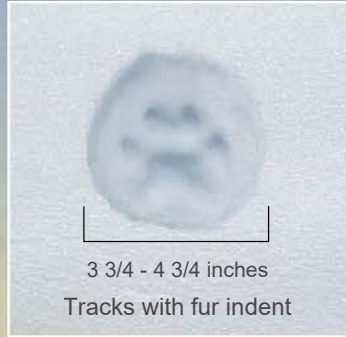
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The Canada lynx is a cat made for the north woods.



Narrow clumps of black fur grow on the tips of the pointed ears.

Huge paws, with thick fur and toes united by a thick web that can spread wide, act like snowshoes.



3 3/4 - 4 3/4 inches
Tracks with fur indent

A beard of long, white-and-black fur grows like a mane around the chin.



The skull has long sharp front teeth and the powerful jaws of a predator.

A Closer Look at Lynx

Winter fur is thick and pale gray. In summer, fur is patterned with pale stripes and splotches.



Long legs raise the cat's body above the snow. Back legs are longer than the front legs.

The tip of the tail is black.

Stands about two feet high at the shoulder - twice the size of an average housecat.

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HERE, KITTY KITTY

About 40 cat species, or *felids*, have been found on every continent except Antarctica. No matter their size—from house cats to lynx to lions—cats look like cats. Felids are powerful *predators* that hunt and eat other animals. From head to toe, they are built for stealth and speed.

To recognize a felid, start with its distinctive face. Large eyes are highly sensitive to movement, in low light or full sunshine.

Lines of stiff whiskers on the cheeks are specialized hairs that allow cats to sense the creatures they hunt, or *prey*, even in darkness. Triangular ears work like antennae, tilting and turning so cats can track sounds coming from different directions.

Felids have massive jaw muscles and sharp teeth for biting, crunching, and grinding food. Muscular legs give them power for leaping and pouncing. And

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a long, flexible spine helps cats turn quickly while chasing prey.

Don't overlook the four paws! Dogs, or *canids*, have heavy nails that click on surfaces as they walk. But felids can move silently because their claws are raised above their toes and buried in fur. These built-in weapons can be extended in a flash by tightening the paws like fists.

Felids make all kinds of sounds to

communicate. Kittens mew to call their mother and purr when cozied up with her. One cat may grumble softly when greeting another as friends or mates. When facing an enemy, a cat often hisses, snarls, and growls.

Lynx have all these traits, plus others that make this felid perfectly suited for life in cold, snowy places like northern Minnesota.

CAT CLUES

Wildlife biologist Dan Ryan started studying Minnesota's lynx population in 2002 when he worked for the U.S. Forest Service. Every winter for more than 20 years, he went out into the snowy wilderness of Superior National Forest in northern Minnesota—but he rarely saw lynx in person. Instead, Ryan looked for their tracks in the snow.

"Lynx leave really big tracks," Ryan says. "They can be about the same size as a wolf's track, though wolves are much bigger animals." In part, that's because a lynx can stretch its toes unusually wide. Also, lynx paws are covered in fur, top and bottom. When they step in snow, the fur makes a wide, soft imprint around each footprint.

"Lynx weigh up to 30 pounds," says Ryan, "but having large and furry feet helps to spread out their weight, like when a person wears snowshoes." That allows lynx to walk where other predators of similar size would sink right in.

Tale of a Tail. Around the world, most felids have long tails, but the lynx's tail is just a few inches long. Biologists aren't sure why their tailed evolved this way.

Another Minnesota felid, the bobcat, shares this feature with lynx and looks similar in other ways. The tail is one way to tell them apart. "A lynx's tail looks like it's been dipped in ink," says Dan Ryan. By comparison, bobcat tails are striped near the body, while the tip is black on top and white below.

Not So Shy. If you're lucky enough to spot a wildcat in Minnesota, behavior provides another clue to identifying it. "Bobcats usually run away when people are near," says Ryan. "If you see a wildcat in Minnesota and it just stares or ignores you, it's probably a Canada lynx. Like a lot of animals in the far north, they just don't seem scared of people."

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U.S. Forest Service wildlife biologist Dave Grosshuesch looks for signs of Canada lynx in Superior National Forest. He finds clues including lynx tracks and lynx scat, or poop.





UP NORTH

“North woods” is a nickname for Minnesota’s northeastern corner, stretching from the Canadian border to the shoreline of Lake Superior. A lot of this landscape is in Superior National Forest, where Dan Ryan did his lynx research. The Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness and Voyageurs National Park are also part of the north woods. This

is the only part of Minnesota—and one of few places south of Canada—where lynx live.

Here, there are lots of *conifer* trees, with needle-shaped leaves. There are also *deciduous* trees that have wide, flat leaves. Northeastern Minnesota is the only part of the state where this mixed forest grows.

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Down on the Ground. Below the tall trees in a mixed forest, there’s a dense *understory* of smaller plants. Tender, tasty ferns and wildflowers blanket the forest floor in summer. Shrubs and young trees produce tender twigs and sweet berries that might last into winter. Where young trees grow close

together in thickets, or old trees fall to the ground, animals can safely raise their young.

The understory is a lynx’s true realm. It’s also home to many other forest animals—including the one that brings lynx to this part of Minnesota, the snowshoe hare.

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Hippity Hoppity. Perhaps you’ve seen cottontail rabbits in yards, parks, or fields where you live. Snowshoe hares are related to those bunnies—but they’re larger in every way. And much like lynx, snowshoe hares are suited for snow with

camouflaged fur and huge feet.

Canada lynx will eat a variety of prey, such as red squirrels or grouse. But if conditions are right, nine out of ten meals in their diet are snowshoe hare. In fact, much of the lynx’s life is tied to this preferred prey.



THE HIDDEN LIVES OF LYNX

In Canada's far-north Yukon, Emily Studd researches the lives of lynx. These wildcats live in hard-to-reach places, so it's not easy to sit and watch their daily lives and behaviors.

To find answers, Studd had to get creative. She attached a few pieces of familiar technology to collars that could be placed on lynx without harming them. One tool was a location tracker, to map the cat's movements. She added a fitness

tracker—the kind people use to count their steps—to learn how much time a cat spent moving versus resting. Finally, Studd added a teensy microphone to record sounds made by the cat.

On the Prowl. Looking through the data, Studd learned that lynx are typically active for fewer than five hours a day. That includes hunting and walking for miles to patrol the edges of a terri-

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tory. In between activities, lynx save energy by resting quietly or grooming their fur.

“Lynx hunt in several ways,” says Studd. “They walk far and wide, looking for snow paths that show prey are near. Or they might sit for hours, waiting for prey to pass by.” Spotting prey leads to a quick jump-capture or a short, fast chase. Lynx are excellent hunters. Still, the prey often escapes, and it can take

many tries to catch a meal.

Neighbors. Studd's data also prove that lynx often interact with each other. “Interacting” can include several things. The cats might call out so neighbors know where they are. Sometimes cats meet and it leads to an eerie screaming match. Or, more often than Studd expected, two or three adult lynx come together to hang out or hunt.



MINNESOTA LYNX

Dan Ryan's research also tells an important story. By tracking lynx through Minnesota's north woods, his team of scientists confirmed that these wildcats are breeding in Minnesota every year.

"Minnesota's lynx population might not be large," says Ryan, "but so far it appears to be steady."

Family Time. A female lynx doesn't need to dig a burrow or find a cave as her den in the north woods. Instead, she seeks out a fallen conifer—there are many in the forest. If the tree fell recently, its needle-covered branches will still hang down like a curtain over the

ground. In this hidden space, she can safely give birth.

Lynx kittens are born in early spring, and they stay with their mother for most of a year. Newborn kittens stay hidden in their den, protected from soaking rain and hungry wolves or coyotes. Older kittens play and fight with each other, and they follow their mother to learn hunting skills. In 2024, Ryan's team identified 14 lynx mothers with kittens in the Superior National Forest.

Another exciting story recently came from Voyageurs National Park. This deep wilderness, along Minnesota's border with Canada, has few roads among

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lots of lakes and wetlands. Hare habitat is found only in patches, so lynx aren't often seen here. But in September 2025, wolf researchers caught an amazing bit of video on a trail camera. There sat a lynx, on a path in the forest. A moment later, two kittens trotted down the trail toward her—the first evidence of recent lynx breeding in this part of Minnesota.

Hungry Times. When there are plenty of hares in Minnesota's mixed forest, lynx can stay here, breed, and increase in number.

But there's a catch. A larger lynx population will eat more hares. This is part of a natural cycle in which the hare population becomes smaller. Fewer hares mean hungry lynx—and that's the top

cause of death for these wildcats. In response to hunger, a mother lynx might have fewer kittens or stop breeding. Hunger can also force lynx to wander north, into Canada, in search of better hunting grounds.

The Cycle Continues. Here's the good news: When predator numbers fall, hares can begin to reproduce more. Eventually, growing numbers of hares lure lynx to return to start the cycle again.

Time will tell if lynx can continue to thrive in Minnesota. For now, how inspiring it is to know these secretive cats are out there, walking the trails of our north woods.

TEACHERS RESOURCES. Find a Teachers Guide and other resources for this and other Young Naturalists stories at mndnr.gov/young_naturalists.