



This bobcat ran up an oak tree east of Exeter, in eastern Tulare County. The eyes reflect different colors, the bobcat's right eye reflects yellow from the bark, the left eye reflects blue/green from the sky. Shot with a Nikon D3s body, Nikon 500mm f4 lens, ISO 400, 1/350 at f5.6, Induro tripod.

California Bobcats

20 Seconds of Excitement



By
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Winter mornings are dark in the San Joaquin Valley of California. The first rays of light paint the west foothills, moving east as the sun clears the Sierras; but east side or west side—the bobcats and I have a rendezvous ahead. I've had hundreds of bobcat encounters over the past seven years that have allowed me to refine my tactics and improve my images. There is a large bobcat population throughout California, from the southern deserts north through the Sierras, adjacent valleys, and along the coastal mountains. Over the years I've learned a lot about photographing bobcats; the best months, the best times, the best places to look—and that knowledge has put thousands of wild bobcat images into my stock library.

WHERE

It's dark when I leave Tulare, and when my group of three photographers meets up and we head into the foothills the sun is up, or close to it. Unlike most wildlife photography where morning is a prime time, the bobcats are most active well into the winter morning, say by 10-10:30am, on through late afternoon. Mornings are cool and the grass is damp with dew—both things that slow down bobcat activity. Less active in wet conditions, the bobcats spend time on fallen oak limbs and trunks cleaning wet feet, not hunting. The two counties I drive are Tulare (east side) and San Benito (southeast side) where rolling oak woodlands rise from valley floors providing the

kind of cover and food bobcats need. Ultimate hunters, these bobcats live in an ideal environment of squeaking, crawling, and fluttering food.

PREPARATIONS

We travel in a single vehicle, my F-150 XLT 4-door truck; it has a shell with customized window shelves and tripod brackets. Previously I'd allowed another vehicle to follow, with radios for communication, but success for the following vehicle was always low. I drive a white truck because that's what most local ranchers drive, and I want the bobcats to think I'm just another ranch truck on the backroads. The truck is camouflage for us right out in the open. The cats don't seem to fear the truck, but exiting the truck makes you a predator they do fear, a human, usually causing them to flee. While we rarely get out of the vehicle in the field, I make sure everything is ready to go before we leave our meet-up spot. Prepping the cameras comes first—having an appropriate ISO already set for the anticipated light (min of 400, on up to 1600), motordrive on high, metering set to Aperture Priority with the largest f-stop chosen, bean bag handy, longest lens on the camera body, teleconverters off the camera body initially until the light is brighter, tripods with legs extended in the back, etc. I have extra water in a cooler with ice and encourage folks to bring snacks until we stop for lunch. I know where every bathroom is along my chosen routes. I talk to them about not speaking once we find a bobcat, no quick movements inside, and that I will turn the truck



This female bobcat is perfectly camouflaged laying on an oak trunk in Pinnacles National Park. Nikon D3s body, Nikon 500mm f4 lens, ISO 800, 1/320 at f4, window rest.



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This male bobcat stretches and scratches, working his claws on the fallen oak trunk in southeastern San Benito County. Nikon D3s body, Nikon 500 f4 lens, ISO 800, 1/320 at f4, hood rest.

around for the others to shoot after about a minute, if we get that long. My over-riding concern is shooting quickly, the seconds are precious.

SEARCH

And with that the search begins. Bobcats are not difficult to spot once you learn how to look for them. Most folks look in the distance for wildlife, scanning beyond 50 yards, and only picking up the obvious. I look for bobcats close first, moving from the roadside to the near meadows, along fence or tree lines, and then back. There are three ways to spot them: they are moving (active), their shape stands out from their surroundings

(change in contrast), or their color stands out from the background (change in color). Often I take a second look at something that I initially passed over visually—and I'm willing to stop and back-up when someone thinks they spotted something. Sometimes they have; four sets of eyes will find a lot of wildlife. I keep my speed to 25-30 mph on the backroads to give us the best chance, but we still have sore necks by the end of the day.

SHOOTING

When bobcats aren't moving they are either watching an area to hunt, or are belly-down hunting. They will hunt mice just as readily as squirrels, quail, or cottontails—and their success rate is high. That initial burst of speed when a stalk culminates in an attack is incredibly fast and difficult to capture. Like most cats, bobcats try to control their bodies while preparing for an attack, but with close observation you can see their muscles twitch and tighten...and at that moment you get the motordrive going. You can't wait, successfully reacting to their body's visual signals that an attack is imminent is the way to catch that moment. If they leap you are already in action, if they relax you just get off the trigger and let the camera buffer clear, getting ready for the next moment. It is literally a game of cat-and-mouse between you and the bobcat. Most of my bobcat encounters last about 20 seconds or less, enough time for them to realize that they have been seen, but also enough time for me to rip off 80+ images.



I knew one day I would find a bobcat coming down this fallen Valley Oak trunk, in Pinnacles National Park. Nikon D3s body, Nikon 500mm f4 lens, ISO 800, 1/1600 at f6.3, window rest.



This big male bobcat finishes eating a California Ground Squirrel in southeastern San Benito County. Nikon D3s body, Nikon 500mm f4 lens, ISO 800, 1/250 at f4, Induro tripod.



This bobcat is mousing, leaping through the air to attack a gopher or vole. Photographed in Leidig Meadow in Yosemite Valley, Yosemite National Park. Shot with a Nikon D3s body, Nikon 500mm f4 lens, ISO 3200, 1/1000 at f4, Induro tripod.

20 SECONDS

Your success or failure comes in those first 20 seconds. My instructions to those shooting with me are, "... once we see a bobcat, the windows go down; get your bean bag in the window and your lens up and ready. Don't be afraid to buffer the camera and don't shoot individual shots. Use the motordrive to shoot in sequences ...". Rarely the bobcats ignore you, giving you minutes to compose and shoot. Those are the more confident males, while smaller females run for cover more quickly. In those rare instances we exit the vehicle, tripod-up, and work the bobcat for a better shooting position. I've witnessed other photographers traipsing around on foot looking for bobcats, thinking they can stalk one—but this is a mistake. Bobcats will avoid your approach; there is no surprising a wild hunter like a bobcat. When bobcats are visible, and continue to remain visible, that may be an invitation for us to leave the truck. With the photography stars perfectly aligned, the bobcat might even climb a tree. It has happened seven times to me—six times voluntarily and one time chased up by a coyote. When they do, normally in areas where ranchers have dogs, it's to evade those other animals or you. Bobcats will climb to the first branch, or where the trunk divides, and will sit and watch, waiting for your departure. In those situations I tripod-up and maneuver for the best shooting position...the bobcat won't depart the tree until you leave.

In 2014 I kept count of the bobcat encounters I had over 21 shooting days...152. My high was 16 different bobcats in one day, photographing 13. That averages to 7 cats per day—but that's after a 10-hour day of searching. It can be a grueling search as we travel many miles (around 300), and many hours; every empty meadow looking like the last one...but then it happens. There is a ridiculously close bobcat right next to you. You have 20 seconds. ■



This big male bobcat slinks away when it realizes I see it, near Cambria, California, along Highway 1. Nikon D7100 body, Nikon 500mm f4 lens, ISO 800, 1/350 at f4, window rest.