

# Get Wild: The amazing lynx

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Frances Hartogh  
Get Wild



A Canada lynx is pictured in winter.

*Getty Images*

“It sounds like someone’s being strangled!”

On a hike in the Holy Cross Wilderness Area, my fellow volunteer wilderness ranger and I heard eerie cries. Redoubling our pace, we were suddenly treated to an amazing site: two spectacular lynx traveling up a nearby scree slope. We’d heard a lot about these elusive cats but had never before seen them or heard their bizarre vocalizations. We stood mesmerized, listening and watching, as they walked from view.

With snow still deep in the High Country, it is the perfect time to learn more about *Lynx Canadensis*, also known as Canada lynx. In deep snow, exceptionally large hind paws act as snowshoes. Long back legs make lynx highly adapted to hunt their preferred prey, snowshoe hares. Lynx tracks can be up to 5 inches wide and 8 inches long. The pads are rarely visible due to their furry feet — another adaptation to snowy habitat.

Male lynx weigh about 24 pounds and are 3 feet long. Females are slightly smaller than males and give birth to one to four kittens in March or April. Lynx are mostly nocturnal and solitary, but kittens remain with mom for about 10 months.

Bobcats, which go by the scientific name *lynx rufus*, are often mistaken for Canada lynx since their numbers are greater. They're close in size, and both have short tails. But Canada lynx have longer black ear tufts and more-prominent facial ruffs, longer hind legs and larger feet, a solid black tip on the ends of their tails and long grayish-brown coats in winter, which turn reddish in summer, that generally lack bobcats' more distinct striping and spots.

Canada lynx were native to Colorado, but years of fur trapping and habitat loss led to their disappearance. In 1999, Colorado Parks and Wildlife began a reintroduction program. Through 2006, the agency imported 218 lynxes from Alaska and Canada, releasing them in southwestern Colorado with tracking collars. The cats suffered high mortality rates in the first years after reintroduction. Parks and Wildlife estimates 150 to 250 lynx now live in Colorado and considers the reintroduction successful. Since 2000, the Endangered Species Act protects them as a threatened species in the lower 48 states.

Perhaps no other animal has been more controversial in Colorado's ski industry history. The 2000 opening of Blue Sky Basin at Vail Mountain followed years of controversy over lynx habitat, including the 1998 protest burning of Vail's Two Elk restaurant. An appeal of Breckenridge's 2013 Peak 6 expansion over concerns about harm to lynx populations was dropped after [Vail Resorts agreed to increase its contribution to the National Forest Fund](#) for habitat improvements in Summit County.

Lynx have few predators in Colorado, but climate change and habitat loss threaten their future. Their ideal habitat – high-altitude spruce-fir forests with deep snow and abundant snowshoe hares – provides them a competitive advantage. To survive, lynx must catch a snowshoe hare every two to three days. If hares are scarce, lynx will seek rodents and other mammals (occasionally baby deer, elk or moose), birds and carrion, but they need snowshoe hares to thrive.

Habitat connectivity, increasingly compromised by recreation and development, is essential. The Vail Pass area, long deemed important for lynx expansion, is increasingly impacted by motorized winter sports. It's hoped that additional wildlife crossings being built across Interstate 70 over Vail Pass will help local lynx travel more safely.

If you're fortunate to see a lynx in the wild, be sure to fill out Parks and Wildlife's [lynx sighting form](#). In the meantime, check out National Geographic Wild's short video, "Two Lynx Cats Scream at Each Other – Can You Stand It?"

Two Lynx Cats Scream at Each Other—Can You Stand It? | ...







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“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Frances Hartogh is a volunteer wilderness ranger and sawyer for the Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, an all-volunteer nonprofit that helps the U.S. Forest Service protect and preserve the wilderness areas in Eagle and Summit counties. For more information, visit [EagleSummitWilderness.org](https://EagleSummitWilderness.org).

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