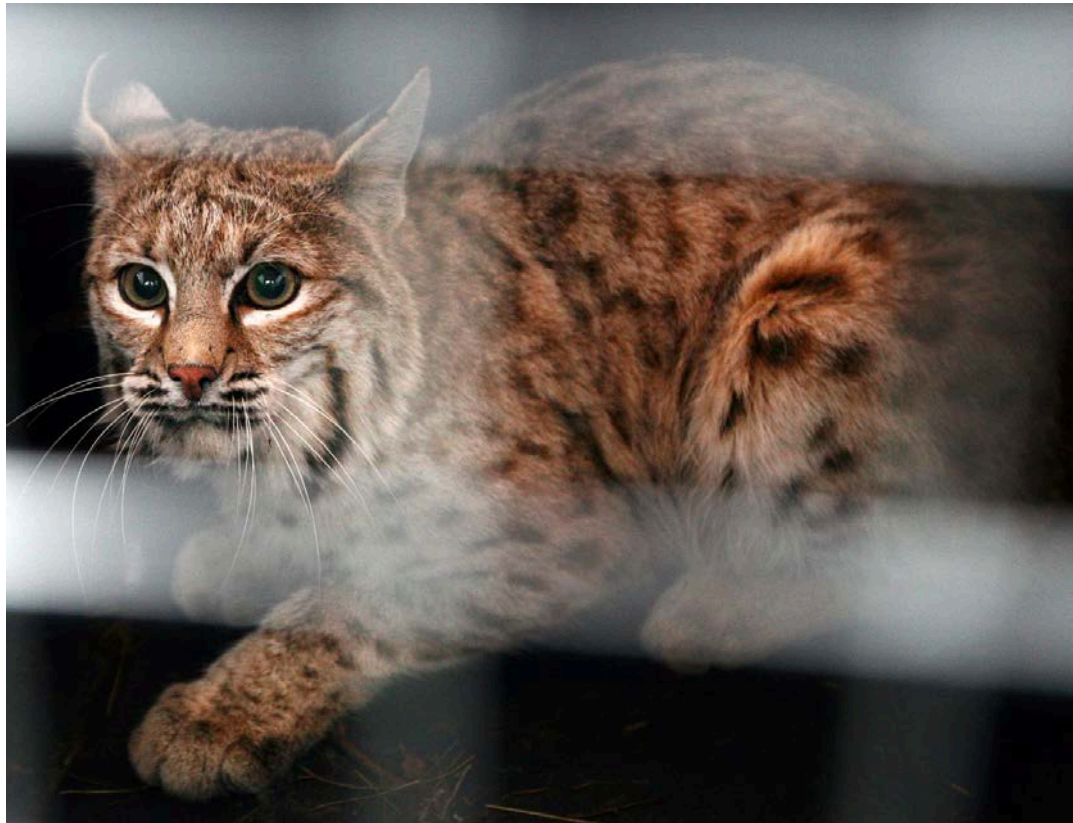


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Opinion: Fur trapping didn't stop in 1918 — Colorado hunters still pursue valuable bobcat pelts

Colorado voters can protect bobcats and mountain lions this fall



In this Dec. 7, 2007, file photo, a bobcat trapped in a snare at the Billings, Mont., airport looks out of his crate before being released east of Shepherd, Mont. (Associated Press file)

By **TED WILLIAMS** | Writers on the Range

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Unlike the rest of modern wildlife management, killing bobcats is unregulated, driven not by science but by fur prices. We're stuck in the 19th Century when market hunters, for example, shot boatloads of waterfowl with 10-foot-long, 100-pound "punt guns."

Now, there's a campaign in Colorado — via a November 2024 ballot initiative — to ban hunting and trapping of bobcats, Canada lynx and mountain lions, though lynx are already listed by the state as endangered and supposedly protected.

As a lifelong hunter and angler, I'm told by a group called the Sportsmen's Alliance that it's my duty to defend bobcat trapping and hunting against such "antis" as those pushing the ballot initiative.

But a true sportsmen's alliance of ethical hunters — Teddy Roosevelt, George Bird Grinnell, William Hornaday, Congressman John Lacey, and other Boone and Crockett Club members — got most market hunting banned in 1918.

It persists today as commercial trapping and hunting of bobcats. Ethical hunters eat what they kill. Bobcat trappers and hunters discard the meat and sell pelts, mostly for export to China and Russia.

Yet the Sportsmen's Alliance warns me that, after bobcat trapping gets banned, "hunting ... and even fishing are the next traditions in the artis' crosshairs."

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I don't buy it. I've heard this mantra since the 1970s, including from my then-colleagues at the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife who, like me, were fed and clothed by fishing, trapping

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“There are hardly any regulations in any state. No bag limits, no data on how many are out there. The hunting community gets super excited about what it calls the ‘North American Model of Conservation,’ and one of the tenets is you don’t kill for profit or trade,” Elbroch continued. “Trapping violates that model in every way. Bobcat trapping is the extreme — selling fur for luxury items. It’s sickening.”

From December through February, Colorado bobcat hunters and trappers may kill as many bobcats as they please. And hunters are permitted to pursue bobcats with hounds, an inhumane practice for both cats and hounds.

Bobcat traps are also unselective, catching other species such as Canada lynx, raptors, otters, foxes, martens, badgers, opossums and skunks. “Lynx, a close relative to bobcats, are naturally attracted to bait set for bobcats and are harmed, injured or killed when caught in traps,” said Colorado veterinarian Christine Capaldo.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife attempts to rebut such reports with: “No lynx in Colorado has ever been reported as accidentally trapped by bobcat fur harvesters.” Of course not. What bobcat trapper would jeopardize permissive regulations by filing such a report?

So, in addition to an estimated 2,000 bobcats, how many non-target animals are killed by the roughly 4,000 bobcat traps annually set in Colorado? No one has a clue.

Colorado requires “humane” live traps. But they’re scarcely more humane than legholds and less humane than quick-kill conibear traps.

During winter, bobcats keep warm by finding shelter. In live traps they’re immobilized and exposed to cold, rain, snow and wind. Traps must be checked every 24 hours, but there’s virtually no enforcement, so live-trapped bobcats sometimes suffer for days. When traps do get checked bobcats get bludgeoned or strangled.

Before European contact, bobcats prospered throughout what are now the contiguous states. Caucasian immigrants quickly set about rectifying this with an all-out war on the species, behavior that flabbergasted the Indigenous and for which their only explanation was that the pale faces were insane. By the early 20th century, bounties and government control had extirpated bobcats from much of the U.S.

Now bobcats are slowly recovering in every contiguous state save Delaware. That’s an excellent reason not to kill them.

Bobcats belong to all Americans, the vast majority of whom prefer them alive. But they’re managed for the very few people who kill them for profit. And from a strictly financial perspective, live bobcats are more valuable than dead ones.

A study published in 2017 in the journal Biodiversity and Conservation, based on money spent by wildlife photographers, set the value of a single live bobcat at \$308,000. Today the average bobcat pelt fetches \$100.

Ted Williams is a contributor to Writers on the Range, writersontherange.org, an independent nonprofit dedicated to spurring conversation about the West. He writes about fish and wildlife for national publications.

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