

## Cat Tales

I harbor no particular ill-will toward domestic felines; in fact I've actually known a few house-cats that exhibited some redeeming quality or other. That said, I find wildcats immensely more interesting than house-cats. However domestic cats gone feral possess no redeeming qualities whatsoever. That feral cats are now known to be a huge scourge to wildlife accounts for their recent ascent up the unprotected-species, **shoot-on-sight** hit-list. But it took many years for me to accept the science behind that shoot-on-sight logic; many more before I killed a feral cat. In fact, I took a few bobcats before I ever killed a feral.

As a lifelong shooter, hunter and Texan, bobcat seemed the most exotic trophy I could aspire to. My Aunt Mayme once killed a big one in west Texas with a .22 Short from her classic Winchester model 60 pump, reinforcing the mystique I felt for bobcats. The gorgeous creatures represent the epitome of predatory stealth and cunning; so much so that many folks living in good bobcat country never even realize it!

I was well-grown before I saw my first bobcat, but it was many more years before I got their number. I've now taken four bobcats, largely by exploiting the adage "curiosity killed the cat".

My first bobcat fell to a perfect chest shot at 175 yards from a lovely little .222 Contender carbine I assembled, when an agitated whitetail doe exposed the cat's whereabouts. My second bobcat took an arrow from a compound bow after starting to go, but at my mouth squeaking paused just long enough for my draw and release. The third was missed with a recurve bow when he barreled past while responding to my calling, but more urgent squeaking brought him back within thirty seconds. My second arrow went true. As detailed below, the fourth succumbed to curiosity similarly to numbers two and three, but will be my last bobcat.

### Bobcats Good; Feral Cats Bad!

When my wife and I moved to five acres in west-central Texas, our neighborhood was close enough to town to be a convenient dumping ground for unwanted cats. Though it wasn't a trailer-park, neither could Rio Llano 'Estates' exactly be described as a 'gated community'. And just because One can afford a double-wide is no guarantee One has ascended the social ladder beyond the cat-lady rung. Also no guarantee One is astute enough to realize spaying and neutering avoids one cat becoming many before you can "get around to it".

When we moved into our double-wide we had a sweet little female cat. A pretty, lovable little thing, Selah had none of the feline traits that often put me off house-cats.

But one cat soon became three. Not from propagation, but after we adopted two stray kittens; a second female and a little tom-cat with the world's longest cat-whiskers. As with all our pets, we had them spayed and neutered before reproduction able.

It might be an understatement to say un-neutered tom-cats do not peacefully coexist. It's simply not in their nature to not viciously defend their territories, lady cats being the primary motive for such strident territorialism.

Before our new kittens were even grown I spotted a big gray-and-white stray on our property. But not yet reconciled to the idea of cat killing, I made the mistake of giving him (as it turned out) the benefit of the doubt. That stupidity cost me a wad in veterinary expenses to have Whiskers reassembled. I killed my first feral cat a couple days later.

About dark-thirty I and Rusty The Wonder-Dog were startled by a **screeching** cat-fight on the front porch. Rusty went ballistic, almost busting down the door as I grabbed the scoped .22 precharged-pneumatic lever-action air-rifle I'd mounted a light on in preparation for the return appearance of Whiskers' attacker. As Rusty and I came busting out the door, the big gray-and-white streaked up the closest tree. BIG MISTAKE!



*The Korean-made .22 EunJin Sumatra lever-action pneumatic repeater averages quarter-sized groups at 50 yards with 16 grain pellets at 900 FPS and 28 foot-pounds.*

Part of the spaying/neutering process includes clipping or notching one ear for easy identification of reproduction ability, and the airgun's 9X scope allowed instant confirmation the big feral tom was indeed an unclipped stud. Given the offhand shot and steep angle of the 20 yard presentation, I delayed only enough to not rush the trigger.

Because I abhor inflicting pain or suffering on any animal, I've adopted brain shots to avoid suffering and trauma in an animal's last moments. The sharp report of the powerful air carbine was followed a second or two later by a louder-than-expected **THUD** of heavy body impacting Earth. Concerned there might be any fight left in the big feral, I grabbed Rusty before he could rush in. Needn't have worried; a 900 feet-per-second .22 pellet between the eyes ended the brawler's fighting days quite instantly!

On hoisting him by the tail I was impressed with the tom's extremely chunky build and equally-surprising heft. It reminded me of a big badger I killed when I was a kid. "Dense, muscular physiology" is how I'd describe it. Furthermore, "nasty" is the best description I can offer for the condition of the tom's coat. And his stink! It was obvious this cat was feral, virile, built for 'muy macho' tomcat action, and wild as wild gets.

Given this experience, you'd think any silly qualms about taking out feral cats might be behind me. However I still hadn't grown comfortable with the inarguable logic behind controlling ferals. In fact I **inexplicably** *again* gave the next stray cat the benefit of the doubt, and (of course) again paid the price of that stupidity in another big veterinary bill. This time it was our second little female cat Belah that went to the vet.

Live and learn. Feral tom-cats not only enjoy beating hell out of each other, but aren't beyond assaulting ladies! *Finally* over my illogical aversion to killing feral cats, at least felonious toms, my only hesitation next time would be confirming unclipped ears.

When Belah's attacker next strayed onto our property and disappeared into cover, I grabbed the air-rifle, slipped onto the porch, and sent a mouth squeak just loud enough the cat would hear. Within seconds here he came. Not well-concealed, I knew he would stop as I raised the rifle. When he did, it took only a second or two to confirm intact ears in full profile as I drew a 9X bead between his eyes. Another pellet through the brain humanely ended the attacker's criminal career, on the spot, right now!

The next stray got no consideration other than confirming he had no notched or clipped ear. I ended imminent trouble before it could begin by circling his concealed position, luring him out of cover with mouth-squeaks, and braining him immediately.

One more feral stray had to be eliminated while we lived in Trailerville. All four were tom-cats, taken out with brain shots from the air rifle. The last three succumbed to "curiosity killed the cat" small-critter-in-distress mouth-squeaking. They weren't as huge as the first nasty bastard, but all were considerably more heavily-constructed than house-cats. No wonder; life is tough out in the real world, and bodies adapt to hardship.

My habit of skeletonizing brain-shot skulls provides excellent insights into skull anatomy, shot placement, shot angle, and terminal ballistics. Such insights are important because successful brain-shots with airguns demand more than just good marksmanship and wishful thinking.

Though an accurate airgun is easier than more powerful arms to shoot well enough for properly-precise shot-placement, as skull thickness increases, steep shot **angles** become evermore critical to achieve penetration with hollow lead pellets carrying a fraction of the energy of the least powerful firearms. And while it might sound a bit like stunt-work, and certainly would be irresponsible stunt-work for the unqualified, the well-qualified airgunner has the option of efficiently and humanely taking out pests in more settled areas than might be safe or legal with a firearm. I disagree with the adage

“practice makes perfect”, since it seldom does. However practice makes **proficient**, and proficiency instills confidence; at some point, enough confidence and proficiency that apparent stunt-work becomes not just possible, but routine.

#### Building Proficiency

I took up NRA airgun silhouette competition in the 1980s not only for fun, but to improve my offhand shooting skills. It worked! Well enough that, with my aversion to seeing anything suffer, I transitioned from chest shots to brain shots when airgunning small game. That transition did much to also improve my stalking and still-hunting skills, and patience to wait for the right shot-angle so critical to successful braining of small-game and pests with air rifles and pistols. Years of braining small critters improved my hunting and shooting skills enough to bring the realization that powerful precharged-pneumatic airguns opened real possibilities for larger game and varmints.

#### Dreams Realized

I always dreamed of owning enough property to shoot and hunt on, but never expected it to happen. But after selling our home and two inheritances, my wife and I purchased a home on forty acres in north-central Texas. Not exactly a sprawling game ranch, our slice of Texas is enough for unfettered airgunning and some hunting.

Shortly after moving to ‘Ranchito Robinson’ and sighting-in a powerful .177 precharged-pneumatic rifle, I decided to take a stroll around our forty acres just before sunset. Needless to say, feral cats were fresh and foremost on my mind.

The scoped, discontinued Beeman Falcon RS rifle shot dime-sized groups at 50 yards, and was very flat-shooting virtue of zinging heavy-for-caliber 10.3 grain JSB pellets to 985 feet-per-second! Sighting it in to hit within 1/2” of aim-point from 12 to 50 yards eliminated much trajectory guesswork at normal airgun ranges, and minimized hold-over to long airgun ranges. As airguns go and in airgun terms, it shot like a laser!



*The .177 Beeman Falcon bolt-action repeater averaged .60” center-to-center five-shot groups at 50 yards with 10.3 grain JSB Exact pellets at 985 FPS and 22 foot-pounds.*

Emerging from a creek-bed into a relatively open area, I spotted what seemed a large animal a couple-hundred yards distant. Too large for a feral cat, I hoped it might

be a coyote. On looking through the 12X scope, I was surprised to see a large bobcat... that had not noticed me. Carefully easing into cover, I was thinking, "If that big wildcat mauls one of our kitties, there won't be enough left to take to the vet."

Little doubt a male bobcat would defend its territory from other toms. Also little doubt a 25 pound bobcat would make short work of four-pound house-cats. Not to mention what could happen if our Australian shepherd Rusty crossed paths with him. *Nevertheless* I debated taking out the cat as I slipped to within air-rifle range. But by the time I closed the distance and emerged from cover, the cat was nowhere to be seen.

Feeling my stalk had been good, I assumed a sitting position behind weedy cover and sent out a soft small-critter-in-distress mouth-squeak. Within fifteen seconds the cat appeared through cover at full attention. Though we could see one another, there was no clear shot to the brain and the cat vanished quickly as he'd appeared. But my louder and more urgent squeaking brought him back within a thirty seconds; this time with a small opening to the brain. Continued squeaking held him transfixed for the shot.

The sitting, thirty-eight-yard shot was complicated by gusty crosswinds. He dropped instantly at the shot, but within a second or two regained shaky footing. In that second or two I'd already chambered another round with the bolt-action repeater, and my follow-up, broadside shot to the head staggered him again. As he again recovered and started to go, my third shot was directed at his broadside chest. Though he made cover, the big tom didn't make it another ten feet.

As we skinned the tom, my taxidermist buddy said it was the second biggest bobcat he'd seen. Skinning provided insight into the shooting. The first shot hit skull 1" left of intentions, suggesting a slight over-correction for the gusty crosswinds. The second shot also hit skull (broadside), but again not square enough to enter the brain. The third, fatal shot transversed the vitals of the chest, coming to rest under the off-side hide.

Considering this exotic trophy was taken with an airgun, I didn't mind contributing to my buddy's livelihood to commemorate the deed with a full body mount. Guilt pangs of killing such a gorgeous creature were tempered by knowing our pets were less likely to become veterinary patients. Rather, considering the big tom bobcat... mincemeat!



A couple weeks later while driving my ATV in the same area, I jumped another bobcat within thirty yards of the deed. Continued sightings and trail-cam photos in the same immediate area convinced me I'd taken the male of a resident pair. Upon subsequently learning bobcats mate for life, it cut deep to realize I'd widowed a female. Having no reason to believe female cats violently territorial like toms, I felt she posed no danger to our pets and vowed no harm to the widow.

That was in early 2012. In the ensuing six years several sightings and many game-cam photos prove she has thrived on our place. Until recently.

In the last couple months I've seen her more often than usual, and gotten more game-came photos than usual. About a month ago she got up and trotted in front of the ATV over a hundred yards, rather than immediately diving into cover. She looked skinny, and it occurred to me she is at least six or seven years old.

When I checked my cameras three weeks ago there were more widow photos than ever; many in broad daylight, several at close range, and three of her looking at the camera. The widow's right eye was obviously injured, probably blinded.

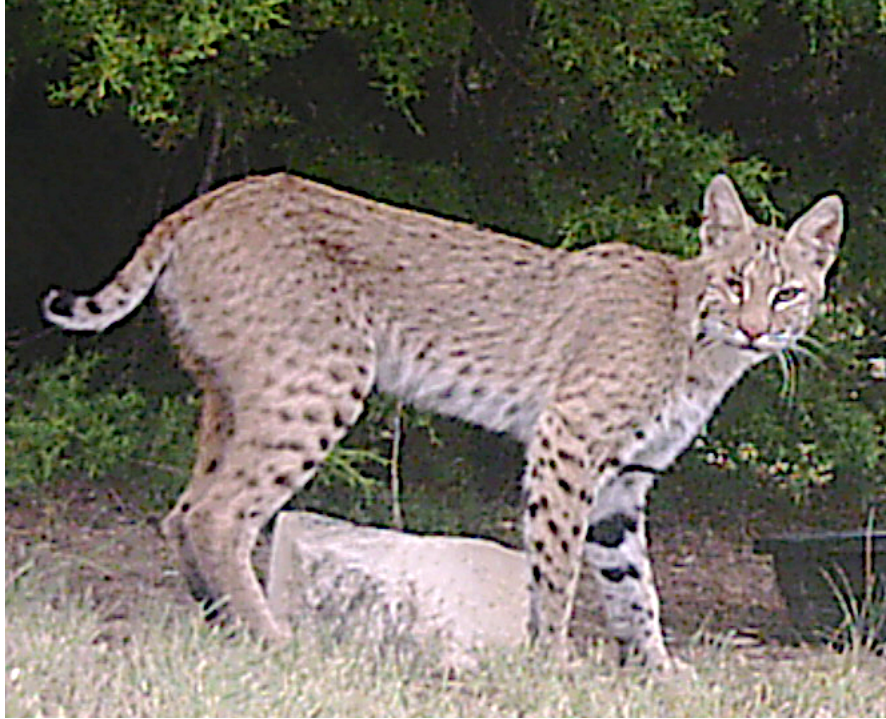
No mammal needs binocular vision more than predators that rely heavily on eyesight to catch food. One telling-angle photo shows the gaunt paunch and protruding hip-bones of a starving animal.

Though I seldom hunt the resident cottontails, I killed a couple that evening and left them at the widow's usual haunts. Then it occurred to me the desperate measure, even if successful in the short term, would only postpone the inevitable.

I've been carrying a .22 magnum semi-automatic rifle since, to put down the beautiful feline whose mate I killed six years ago in defense of our pets. It was an effective defense, unfortunately with unforeseen repercussions that I've felt truly sorry about ever since.

I haven't seen the widow or gotten a photo of her in two weeks. Rest in peace, Lovely Lady. I'll kill no more bobcats.





*One of the last photos of the widow shows an injured right eye; probably blinded.*



*Another last photo shows the gaunt belly and protruding hip-bones of a starving animal.*