

Name that cat! Opinions differ on feline captured by Norway game cam

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By Nicole Carter

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Norway resident Randy Olson put out his game cam earlier this month, capturing an image of a large cat he believes to be a mountain lion. *Courtesy Randy Olson*

NORWAY — When Randy Olson wanted to find out what wildlife was lurking in the woods behind his Waterford Road home in Norway he did not think it would ignite a Facebook debate on what it might be.

Olson set up a game camera on Sept. 6, about a week after the family cat went missing. The first few pictures the camera sent to his phone were nothing out of the ordinary – a young deer and a fox. Then, on Sept. 10 he tapped on his phone screen to see a large cat making its way along a stone wall late at night.

He posted the image to a Maine wildlife page on Facebook and a debate was born. What kind of a cat was this?

Olson posted that he believed it to be a mountain lion. Many agreed. Others stated that it was a bobcat, citing characteristics like the shape of its ears or what appeared to be mottled markings on the front leg. Some claimed it must be a lynx, and several pegged it as a domestic house cat.

Commenters found much to disagree about. What some said was obviously a long tail appeared to others to be short, or even not visible. At least one person said that young and adolescent lions might have uneven markings similar to bobcats.

“I don’t see a tail,” wrote one poster in the comments section. Another helpfully described its appearance, suggesting she lighten the image and the former later exclaimed, “I see it now!”

Another could not be convinced, writing “There’s no tail, Bobcat.” Three posters insisted they could see a long tail, although another lightened the image and agreed there was no tail, adding “...Dark spot on it’s [sic] butt is the end of it’s [sic] bobcat tail.”

The person who said she could see no tail went on to post, “May be an image of deer and outdoors,” which ended replies to her opinion.

After a few people asked for a reference that would help scale the size of the cat, Olson accommodated with a picture showing that the leading part of the stonewall measures 18 inches.

Maine Inland Fisheries & Wildlife’s website lists no identifying traits for mountain lion sightings, but according to Wikipedia an adult eastern cougar stands 24-36” at the shoulder. Males’ weights average between 120-220 pounds while females range from 60-140 pounds.



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A bobcat strolling along an Oxford county tote road caught by Advertiser Democrat staff writer Nicole Carter’s game cam on Aug. 11, 2022. *Courtesy Nicole Carter / Advertiser Democrat*

Wikipedia states that adult bobcats can weigh anywhere from 8.8 to 40 pounds and stand 12-24" at the shoulder. The largest reported bobcat on record was a 60 pound male struck by a vehicle in New Hampshire in 2012.

Several posters chimed in on what state wildlife officials might say about the possibility of a mountain lion sighting in Oxford Hills.

"I have gotten one on camera in Porter while bear baiting," one commented. "When we spoke with the warden he said there is no denying lions in Maine. They cannot declare it as a listed species in Maine due to the lack of a 'breeding population' in his exact words. In order to be listed as a native species it needs to be a sustainable breeding population."

Another wrote that "Logging, hunting, recreation and building will all be impacted" if lions were declared to exist in Maine. "A retired warden told me this 20 years ago."

Posters claimed to have seen them across the state as long ago as 33 years (Hiram) to last week in Bangor. In Oxford county, Canton and Bethel were listed more than once as locations where mountains lions have been spotted, as well as Oxford, Norway and Woodstock.

The conversation veered off course, as all internet debates eventually will, when someone interjected that they had heard a wolf calling while at The Forks earlier in the summer.

A number of people sparred over the date, which is recorded in European format. A handful stated that since it read 10/09/2022 it must be a hoax, as that date has not happened yet. A few posters tried to explain different formats of date and time, even defending the original poster's choices: "Maybe this person chose to do that [day, month year format] Just because it's not used here normally, like in Europe, doesn't mean it can't happen that way here."

Olson told the Advertiser Democrat that he reported the image to Inland Fisheries & Wildlife and after a few days received a call back from Assistant Regional Biologist Joshua Matijas, who is based at the Southwestern Division of the Maine Warden Service in Gray.

"He told me they get lots of sightings reports," he said. "He said it was probably something else."

"A few days before my cat went missing, I saw him sitting on the roof of the car, which he'd never done. He must have sensed some kind of danger."

In addition to the nighttime picture from his game cam, Olson said his neighbor and cousin had seen a similar-looking animal with a smooth coat and muscular shoulders and hips, and also heard a strange cry one night that did not sound like the online audio of a bobcat calling.

The Advertiser Democrat reached out to Matijas for comment but as of press time had not heard back from him. The Inland Fisheries & Wildlife's web page about identifying rare mammals offers this information about possible mountain lions occurring in Maine:

"Cougars have been extirpated from much of their historic range in eastern North America. The last cougar killed in Maine was in Somerset County on the Maine/ Quebec border in 1938. More recently, a 3-year-old male cougar from the Black Hills of South Dakota was struck and killed by a vehicle in Milford, Connecticut in 2011 (a distance of >2,000 km). Cougars have been sporadically documented in eastern Canada from known mortalities (3 cougars) or DNA (17 cougars) in Quebec from 1992- 2011. The Department receives possible cougar sightings each year, but most lack physical evidence. If you see a cougar or other evidence of a cougar (e.g., tracks, scat), take photos and contact a regional wildlife biologist."

A number of people expressed their condolences to Olson on the loss of his cat.

The Facebook page administrator cut off comments after 366 posts were made.

Olson is still checking his camera for wildlife sightings. Most recently he has seen an opossum and a pine marten, but no repeat visits from the big cat to date.

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