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A Case Study of the Eviction of a Female Bobcat and Her Four Kittens from a Suburban Backyard in Fremont, California

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ABSTRACT: Since 2000, the Alameda County Vector Control Services District has received only 10 requests for service regarding bobcats. Seven of those cases have occurred in the past three years. Of those, only one case has involved the bobcats creating a den on a residential property. This is the case study of a mother bobcat and four kittens denning in the backyard of a suburban home in Fremont, California. The eviction of the bobcats from the deck of the vacant home was completed in May and June of 2019. During a four-week period, a wide range of eviction techniques were used, including noise, light, and water harassment, along with eviction fluid and human presence. This experience gave us the opportunity to observe and record the behaviors of bobcats living in a suburban environment and to test various eviction methods that had previously been untested in Alameda County. After four weeks of continuous humane harassment, the eviction was successful.

KEY WORDS: Alameda County, bobcats, eviction methods, human-wildlife interaction, humane harassment, *Lynx rufus*, predators, wildlife

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INTRODUCTION

The bobcat (*Lynx rufus*) is a member of the cat family that can be identified by its short “bobbed” tail with black hair at the tip and its pronounced white dots on the upper ear. Bobcats use a wide variety of habitats and are highly adaptable. They hunt a range of prey, typically smaller mammals such as rabbits, squirrels, and other rodents. However, they are also capable of killing larger wildlife and livestock and will scavenge if necessary (Virchow and Hogeland 2015). Bobcats can shift between nocturnal, diurnal, and crepuscular activity patterns, especially in suburban and urban areas due to human disturbance, food availability, and mesopredator activity (Young et al. 2019). They typically breed in winter, with their young being born in the spring. Bobcats do not form lasting pairs, and the females must stay with the kittens until they reach maturity (Virchow and Hogeland 2015).

Studies have shown increases in bobcat populations across the United States, although population survey and wildlife management methods vary widely (Roberts and Crimmins 2010). Carnivores and humans may interact in many different scenarios. This can regularly occur as a human going hunting or human destruction of carnivore habitats, whether it be accidental or purposeful. Carnivores may also kill livestock and impact human livelihoods. (Young et al. 2019). However, bobcats rarely attack humans. Those that do have typically been identified as sick bobcats infected with the rabies virus (Holzer and Solomon 2009). As bobcat populations increase and humans and wildlife continue to overlap habitats, new methods of wildlife management should be tested and developed. The California Department of Fish and Wildlife’s (CDFW) Wildlife Hotline refers to eviction as “the most humane solution” since the family unit can remain intact and relocate itself safely. Humane harassment and eviction techniques can allow us to live comfortably alongside each other.

In 2019, Alameda County Vector Control (Vector

Control) received almost 2,000 wildlife related requests for service. The most common requests typically involve skunks (*Mephitis mephitis*), raccoons (*Procyon lotor*), and opossums (*Didelphis virginiana*) but can range to coyotes (*Canis latrans*), foxes (*Urocyon cinereoargenteus*), and wild hogs (*Sus scrofa*). However, requests for service regarding bobcats are uncommon in Alameda County, and Vector Control has received only 10 since the year 2000. The most recent, and the topic of this case study, was regarding a mother bobcat and her four kittens who made their den under the backyard deck of a vacant home in Fremont, California. Fremont is in the southern part of Alameda County and covers approximately 77 square miles with a population of about 240,000 (USCB 2019). This home is located in a suburb only 1,500 ft from Mission Peak Park and other areas of open land. Mission Peak Park itself is 3,023 acres of shaded woodlands and open grasslands, but it is connected to other large swaths of open space including Sunol Regional Park which is 6,850 acres (EBRPD 2018). During May and June of 2019, Vector Control biologists along with assistance from a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) wildlife specialist, utilized humane harassment strategies to evict the bobcats from the property. Having encountered very few of these calls, our experience consisted of testing a variety of eviction strategies that have been successful on other wildlife species that are more commonly encountered in the area.

METHODS

On May 9, 2019, a request for service was received stating that a bobcat mother and kittens were in a backyard. The home had been placed on the market in October of 2018 and had been vacant for the previous six months. The new homeowner and the real estate agent had seen the bobcats. As a form of harassment, they placed a lit spotlight in the yard and pointed it at the deck, but it had not prompted the bobcats to move to a new location. A

Vector Control biologist completed an inspection of the home on May 10, 2019 and observed dug-out areas leading underneath a wooden deck in the backyard but did not see or hear any activity. A motion-activated wildlife camera was placed in the yard to monitor and verify bobcat activity. On May 13, 2019, the bobcats were observed in the backyard, and it was determined that they had a den under the deck, based on their presence and the footage seen on the wildlife camera. The mother bobcat showed signs of aggression at the time, and the biologists left the wildlife camera and returned the next day with eviction materials.

Humane harassment strategies by the biologists were started on May 14, 2019. The first technique used other than the spotlight was noise harassment. A leaf blower was placed in one of the areas that had been dug out and was pointed under the deck. It was set on a timer to turn on for 30 minutes every hour, for 24 hours. The following day, the noise harassment was checked due to rainy conditions, and it was found to still be functional. The mother bobcat and the kittens were observed on this day as well.

On May 16, 2019, bobcat hair and paw prints were observed on the leaf blower and the wildlife camera, indicating that the kittens had been climbing on it and were unlikely startled by its presence and the noise. Various other forms of humane harassment were added at this time. Water harassment was employed by spraying water from a hose across the porch, while the biologists were present. This was an attempt to make the den wet and uncomfortable for the bobcats. Bobcat urine was also poured through the cracks in the deck in hopes that it would cause the mother bobcat to feel threatened by another bobcat being in the area, which would lead her to move her young. In addition to the new eviction strategies, the leaf blower was moved to the other side of the deck, where the bobcats had also been seen entering the deck on the camera footage.

Due to neighborhood complaints, the noise harassment through the night ended on May 17, 2019. The timer on the leaf blower was changed to 30 minutes every hour between 8:30 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. Also, on May 17, the mother bobcat was observed on one of the backyard fences; later in the same visit, she vocalized from a neighboring backyard. The kittens then emerged from the deck and quickly moved to that neighboring backyard by crawling through a dug-out opening in the bottom of the fence. This was the first observation of the kittens leaving the initial location.

On May 20, 2019, the mother bobcat was observed traveling along the side of the house, after the biologists had encountered her in the rear of the yard. This was the sixth interaction between the biologists and the bobcats, and the human presence was considered another form of increased harassment. The mother bobcat left the property and took shelter away from the biologists, under vegetation at the neighboring home.

On May 21, 2019, a deck board was removed, eliminating some of the cover the bobcats utilized for their den. The leaf blower was also removed, and an ultrasonic repellent device was placed under the deck in order to change the noise harassment and prevent the bobcats from becoming accustomed to one type of sound. In addition, raccoon

urine was poured into the space as a potential repellent. Raccoon urine is typically used as a humane harassment technique for the other wildlife commonly seen in Alameda County, and it was utilized here based on those experiences.

A follow-up inspection was completed on May 23, 2019; however, no further bobcat activity was seen and the wildlife camera had not picked up any footage after May 21, 2019. No bobcat activity was observed on the camera footage again until June 2, 2019, when the mother bobcat and kittens were seen visiting the area, but they did not return to the den underneath the deck. The ultrasonic device was removed on June 3, 2019, and the deck board was replaced. The camera remained set until a final check for activity on June 27, 2019. At that time, the bobcats had not been seen on the camera and had not returned to their den under the deck. The camera was removed at this time, and the request for service was abated.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The bobcats were first reported to Alameda County Vector Control on May 9, 2019. After various harassment strategies were tried, the bobcats were last seen utilizing the den on May 21, 2019, and last spotted visiting the location on June 2, 2019. The various humane harassment techniques employed by the biologists were light, noise, water, smell, and human presence. The bobcats were subjected to approximately two weeks of this harassment before they relocated. Harassment and monitoring methods were continued for several more weeks to ensure that the bobcats had permanently vacated the den. While the harassment strategies did not initially appear to be affecting the mother bobcat nor encouraging her to relocate her kittens, over time and after a combination of techniques the eviction was successful. However, it is impossible to know if the causative factor was a specific technique, the combination of techniques, or if the mother bobcat would have decided to move on with or without our eviction efforts. The age and motor skills of the kittens may have also been factors in their delay to leave the den. While biologists were at the home working on harassment techniques, a different bobcat was sighted down a nearby street, indicating that the population in the neighborhood is larger than previously known. Almost five months after this request for service was abated, three bobcats were sighted on a security camera about a mile away from this location. It may be the same group of bobcats traveling in the area, or it could be an entirely separate group. Whether this is a different group of bobcats or not, the observation indicates that bobcats are being sighted and reported to Vector Control more frequently than in the past.

The eviction methods utilized were based on previous experiences with other wildlife in the county. Some of the more common requests that also utilize humane harassment strategies include for raccoons in attics, skunks under decks, and opossums in crawl spaces. Along with this information from previous experiences, collaboration with the USDA and their wildlife specialist was also imperative to deciding which eviction strategies would be employed. The biologists and wildlife specialist discussed the option of trapping the bobcat family as a means of removal. In

California, bobcats are considered a nongame animal. For trapping to occur, a depredation permit must be obtained from the CDFW; permits are meant for landowners who are experiencing property damage or public health threats. In this case, the home was unoccupied, and the property was not damaged, so it would not be possible to obtain a depredation permit. While this was the first request for service in Alameda County regarding a bobcat having a den in a residential area, there have been requests regarding coyotes and foxes. With these species, various humane harassment methods, including sound, smell, and light harassment, had been successful. Based on all this input, it was decided that the most humane and effective strategy would be harassment, eviction, and exclusion.

The small number of requests for service that Alameda County Vector Control receives regarding bobcats has not provided county biologists with the opportunity to individually test their harassment strategies with bobcats or to narrow down the best methods through trial and error. However, with increasing bobcat populations, it is likely that there will also be an increasing number of bobcat related requests for service. As such, the development of effective and thorough humane harassment strategies will be greatly beneficial.

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