

NRRI

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News

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NRRI scientists search out Minnesota lynx, boreal owl populations

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Scientists at the Natural Resources Research Institute (NRRI) University of Minnesota Duluth are wrapping up two studies of hard-to-find animals in Minnesota—the Canada Lynx and the Boreal Owl.

The lynx is a 15-25 lb. wildcat with very housecat-like behavior. And like domestic cats who come running at the sound of a can opener, the lynx can most easily be found where their favorite food is. For the lynx, it's a Canadian delicacy: the snowshoe hare. The lynxes thick fur and wide paws also make them well suited to life in the cold, snowy regions of Canada and Alaska and NRRI research is showing that they prefer to stay up there.

“We’re currently unsure if there is a resident breeding population in the Upper Midwest,” said researcher Chris Burdett. “What we get are migrating cats from Canada. They’re very territorial, so when there’s a lynx boom in Canada they need more places to live and may come down this way. But we’re not seeing signs that they stay and breed here.” There is evidence of lynx populations in some western states like Montana and Oregon.

Cat owners won’t be surprised to learn that to collect fur for DNA analysis, the scientists used a combination of catnip on carpeting and a twisted pie tin on a string to peak the cat’s curiosity. The research project was funded by the U.S. Forest Service which has similar projects underway across the northern half of the United States.

Another shy and reclusive animal, the Boreal Owl, is also being studied by an NRRI research team with funding from the U.S. Forest Service and the Department of Natural Resources to learn more about their habitat needs and breeding habits.

“So little research has been done on this species,” said NRRI researcher Lisa Belmonte, “It’s been a real challenge working with a nocturnal owl that’s also very rare in this area.”

With careful listening and skillful calling, the researchers have monitored many owl song perches and found 14 cavity trees in Lake and St. Louis counties. They caught six boreal owls that researchers fitted with radio transmitters to learn more about their home range size and habitat needs.

“This study will help the U.S. Forest Service and the DNR better manage the forests to meet the needs of this bird,” said Belmonte.

NRRI’s mission is to foster economic development of Minnesota’s natural resources in an environmentally sensitive manner to promote private sector employment.

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