

More room to roam for the Canada lynx

But at what cost to Minnesota!

Outdoors



Jesse White
Mesabi Daily News Staff Writer

The lynx is back, baby — this time with more official room to roam. More than 8,000 square miles in Minnesota alone. The entire Arrowhead Region of the state is now considered critical habitat for the oft discussed but seldom seen cat after the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced a revised critical habitat designation for the Canada lynx this week. In total, the amount of territory defined as "critical" to lynx survival in the United States has been increased to more than 20 times the size of what had originally been decided in 2006. Across Maine, Minnesota, Montana, Wyoming, Idaho and Washington, 39,000 square miles was designated "critical." That number had been just under 2,000 square miles. In Minnesota, approximately 8,065 square miles of habitat in

portions of Cook, Koochiching, Lake and St. Louis counties and Superior National Forest were designated.

The designation affects state, federal and private lands. In Minnesota, just about every square inch of real estate east of Highway 53, from Duluth to International Falls, now falls under the critical habitat tag.

The Canada lynx was protected under the Endangered Species Act as a threatened species in 2000 and by 2006 the ESA had designated 1,841 square miles of critical habitat for the lynx within the boundaries of Voyageurs National Park, Glacier National Park in Montana, and North Cascades National Park in Washington.

In 2007, the FWS was forced to revisit the designation via court decision after it was determined that Julie MacDonald — former President George W. Bush's appointee as the Interior Department's deputy assistant secretary overseeing the Fish and Wildlife Service — had pressured federal biologists to reach industry-friendly conclusions.

According to the USFWS, critical

habitat is a term used to describe geographic areas

containing features essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and may require special management considerations for protection.

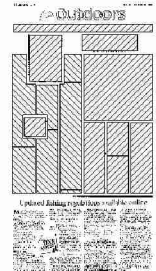
For the lynx, those areas include boreal forest landscapes that provide one or more of the following beneficial habitat elements including:

- Snowshoe hares for prey.
• Abundant, large, woody debris piles that are used for dens.
• Winter snow cover conditions that are generally deep and fluffy for extended periods of time.

And who is affected the most by this expansion?

Well, the list probably includes trappers, mining operations and of course the logging industry, which is listed within ESA literature as "the most threatening human activity throughout much of the lynx's habitat."

According to the FWS, "Timber harvest and associated forestry management can be beneficial or detrimental to lynx



depending on harvest methods and specifications.

"Forestry practices can be beneficial for lynx when the resulting understory densities meet the forage and cover needs of snowshoe hares.

"Although areas that are cut may not be initially used by snowshoe hares and lynx, after regeneration those areas can provide high quality hare habitat and sustain lynx populations.

"Thinning activities (e.g. mechanized pre-commercial thinning or herbicide treatments) to promote vigorous growth of fewer trees removes the understory cover preferred by snowshoe hares.

"As a result, thinned stands tend to have lower snowshoe hare densities needed to support lynx populations. For actions that are entirely private or with no Federal involvement, consultation is not necessary."

What does all that mean?

Probably more restrictions and more pressure on an already suffering industry.

It's also interesting to note that a huge chunk of President Barack Obama's stimulus money — about \$800 million — has been earmarked for biomass loans in Minnesota. Yet at the same time the same government pushing for renewable energy is also putting new restrictions on the forests where the resource comes from.

Aren't the piles of "woody debris" so critical for lynx dens the same piles of wood biomass

operations are looking for?

Some of the designated land in Minnesota is also privately owned, but FWS officials are saying requirements for consultation on critical habitat do not apply to entirely private actions on private lands.

Critical habitat designations only apply to federal lands or federally funded or permitted activities on private lands.

When you take all of this mumbo-jumbo into consideration, one thing becomes clear to me — the cost of doing business in northern Minnesota (if any gets done at all) just went up.

It's inevitable that this ruling will lead to a more congested permitting process for loggers and mining operations.

It's also fair to assume that some mining projects in the works or already up and running will probably face massive delays or be stopped all together over this issue.

And it goes without saying that this designation opens the door for more lawsuits from environmental groups.

All of this for the Canada lynx, an animal that roams abundantly in more northern locations like Canada and Alaska — its natural range — but is considered an endangered species in the United States.

Experts from the Natural Resources Research Institute in Duluth, which did a study of the lynx a few years back, estimate there are 200 to 400 lynx in the state of Minnesota.

But nobody really knows how many lynx are in the

state.

In fact, some estimates put the number closer to 150.

While there are decent populations in places like Montana, Vermont, Idaho and Washington, the lynx has been considered a rare animal in Minnesota since the late 1970s.

In 2002, Paul Burke, a biologist for the USFWS, when asked if there is a permanent population of the cat in northern Minnesota, said this: "I think we have a very small number, but we do have some lynx. We may even have some reproduction, but that doesn't make it a viable population."

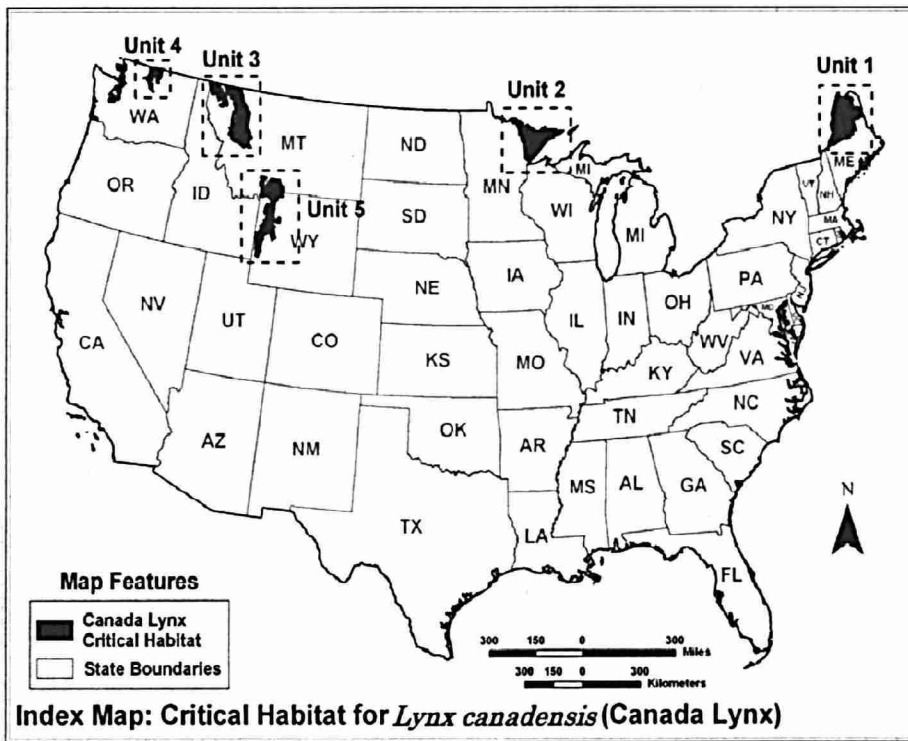
In the same article where Burke was quoted, an official from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources wrote: "Minnesota is on the southern edge of the lynx's range, which reaches across Canada and Alaska. The cat's population is notoriously cyclic. High numbers in Minnesota correspond with high numbers in Canada. When Canada's lynx grow scarce, Minnesota's lynx seem to disappear."

The lynx population also largely depends on the snowshoe hare population which naturally rises and falls on a 10-year cycle.

And no amount of silly rules or designations will change that fact.

The Canada lynx is just not at home here and never will be.

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Jesse White can be reached at jesse.white@mx3.com. To read this story online and comment on it go to www.virginiamn.com.



Courtesy of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services
The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced this week that 39,000 square miles in the United States is now designated as critical habitat for the Canada lynx. In Minnesota, almost the entire Arrowhead Region has received the designation covering over 8,000 square miles.

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