

WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao

BOBCAT

One of the most exciting outdoor experiences is having a close encounter with a truly wild animal — especially a top predator. Throughout most of Florida, the two top predators are the coyote and the bobcat, since the rare Florida panther is restricted mostly to the Everglades region. (Although technically classified as a “carnivore”, the black bear eats mostly plant material and insects)

In the last week of 2018, I had such an encounter with not one, but two, bobcats while riding my bike along a dirt road in Lake Apopka’s North Restoration Area. After first

glimpsing the pair in the distance, I got off my bike and slowly, quietly crept closer and closer on foot while aiming my camera at them. When I was within 50 feet, the bobcats disappeared into the marsh vegetation, and I thought my wonderful experience was over. But when I reached that point, there they were, actually relaxing and interacting on the ground in a small clearing and allowing me to take countless photos just 10 feet away! As long as I made no sudden moves or noises, they exhibited no fear, and there was no one else around for miles.

Bobcats are occasionally seen in Victoria Park, and their footprints and scat are common in our conservation areas. They represent no threat to humans. About twice the size of a house cat, a bobcat weighs 20 to 35 pounds, stands 2 feet tall and is about 4 feet long, including its very short tail. Its long legs, large paws, pointed/tufted ears, and facial fringes give the bobcat a distinctive appearance. The fur ranges from tan to gray to reddish brown and usually has at least

some spotting or streaking.

Most bobcats hunt their prey (rodents, rabbits, opossums, birds) at night and are rather secretive by day. But sometimes, as I was so fortunate to experience, they venture out into the light and allow humans to catch a glimpse.