



Sphinx, Queen of Villa dei Fiori

Bobcats are nocturnal creatures, difficult to spot in the wilderness. Our bobcat was different than other bobcats. Fascinated by people, at twilight she clandestinely observed me for weeks before she decided to venture closer, reclining on the boulders to watch me as I gardened or did aerobic dance. She felt so safe at Villa dei Fiori that she established her den and birthed three kittens in the boulders above my home. Bobcat kittens are born in spring, nurse for two months before eating solid foods. At five months, the mother teaches her young how to hunt. Around eight to eleven months of age, mama forces them out of the den, leads them to a new territory where they must survive alone.



A bobcat was electrocuted while climbing a power pole leaving a two-week old kitten without a mother. Rick Boyd, city of Twentynine Palms animal control supervisor, took the tiny kitten to the Humane Society's Fund for Animals Wildlife Center in Romona, San Diego County, renowned for rehabilitating wildlife from snakes to Black bears and cougars.



Severely underweight, the kitten was suffering from coccidiosis, a parasitic disease of the intestinal tract, a condition that would have meant certain death in a tiny kitten. With treatment she recovered, doubling her weight within the first two weeks, the center releasing rats for her to hunt so that she could learn to fend for herself in the wilderness. When she was three months old, the center was ready to find a place for her to be released into a habitat identical to her origins. Annica Kreuter, a keen observer and caretaker of wildlife, was visiting the wildlife center in Ramona, and suggested that the center release the cat into the wild on my property on the Joshua Tree National Park.



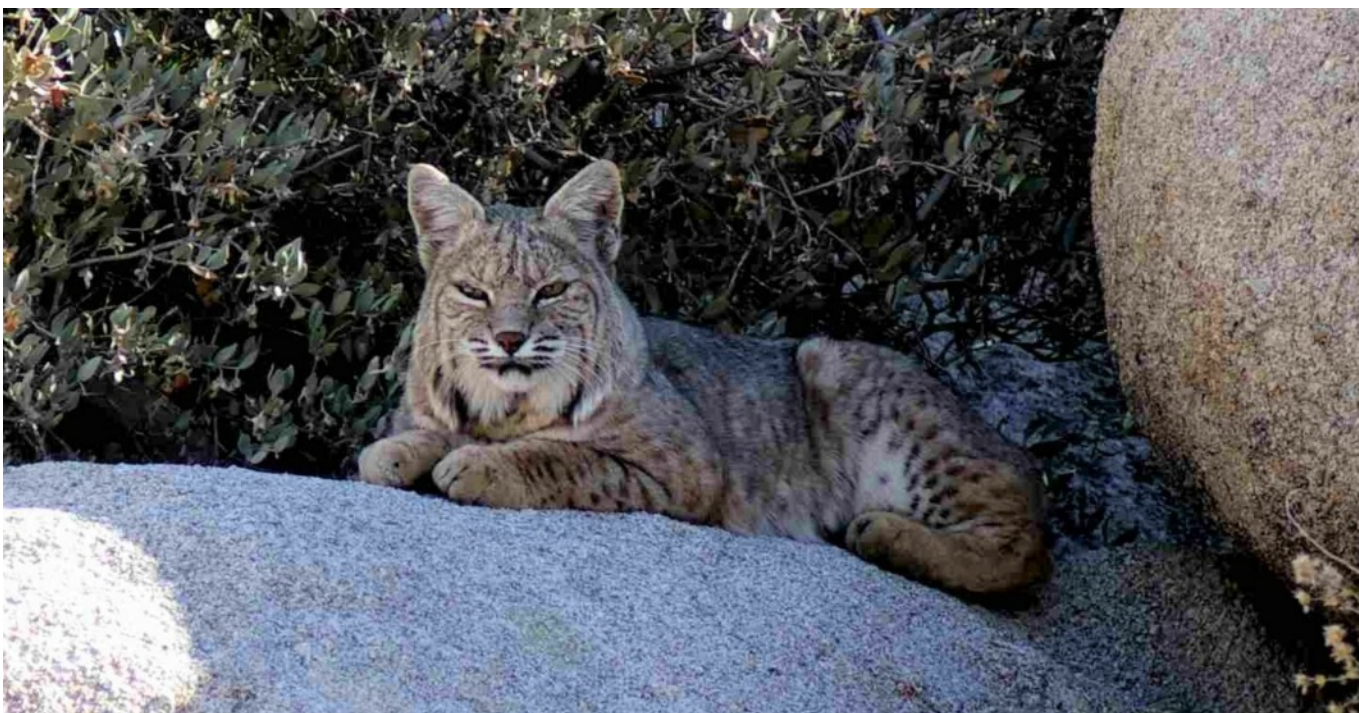
After obtaining my consent, Amy Smith, an animal care specialist with the center, released the adolescent cat in the boulders of Villa dei Fiori.



Denis Goolsby, reporter for the Palm Springs newspaper, *The Desert Sun*, published the report, “Orphaned, rehabbed bobcat released in Joshua Tree,” which along with a video may be found on the following link: <https://www.desertsun.com/story/news/2015/12/20/orphaned-rehabbed-bobcat-released-joshua-tree/77474922/>



The bobcat, *Lynx rufus*, is believed to have evolved from the Eurasian lynx, which like the Bighorn sheep, crossed over the Bering Land Bridge during the Pleistocene era 2.6 million years ago. Isolated by the glaciers of the ice age, they evolved into the modern bobcat around 20,000 years ago.



In December of 2013, while working in my garden on my birthday, I saw our frequent visitor, our female bobcat sprawled on the boulders above. She loved watching people, often coming to the house to peer into the glass doors. I named her Sphinx the Lynx. She felt so safe here that she chose to birth her three kittens in a boulder den just twenty-five feet from the house. I left that day to spend Christmas in Los Angeles. When I returned on New Year's Eve, I never saw Sphinx again.

At the end of January, the local newspaper, the *Hi-Desert Star*, reported that astronomer and conservationist Tom OKey had discovered on his land a fur trapper's cage not far from Villa dei Fiori. I realized then why Sphinx had never returned. She had been slain for her beautiful coat.

All of us in Joshua Tree thought our bobcats were protected. We were wrong. A commercial trapper violated the mores of our community. The manufacturer of the traps, Mercer Lawing of Barstow, had sold the traps to Nathan Brock, an active-duty Marine who set 30 traps and killed five cats in one night. Without permission one was placed on my friend Tom OKey's land on the border of the Joshua Tree National Park. We learned that trappers can lure bobcats off the 720,000-acre park by spreading scent pheromones leading directly into a trap set on private land, furnished with battery-powered fake birds with vibrating feathers to lure the cat into the trap, the trapper returning later to shoot the bobcats dead. If the trapper does not return in a timely manner the cat dies an excruciating death.





Prime bobcat pelts that can command a price of \$1,200 are shipped to Russia, China, and Greece where they are made into fur coats---a full-length coat costing as much as \$100,000 in the luxury markets of Paris, Milan, or Dubai. One of the primary manufacturers of fur apparel is in Kastoria, Greece. Lewis Sahagan, reporter for the Los Angeles Times, interviewed Brendan Cummings and Annica Kreuter who had lost seven of her cats on the border of the park. When we compared notes, we discovered that all along the park border, the bobcats had been wiped out. In the quarter of a century that I have lived next to the national park, nothing has affected me as deeply as the mass killing of our bobcats. Sphinx's intelligence and sinuous grace brought life to my land. Someone who lives alone, I loved her beyond the beyond. She was the queen of all.

Enraged by the killings, the activists of Joshua Tree formed Project Bobcat with the passionate goal of changing California law to protect our magnificent bobcats. California Assemblymember Richard Bloom, Democrat representing Santa Monica, aided by his legislative director, Guy Strahl, and guided by Brendan Cummings, director of the Center for Biological Diversity's wildlands programs, introduced the Bobcat Protection Act, AB1213 in the Sacramento legislature.



ProjectBobcat.org began building support through the Internet across the state, a movement supported by the Mojave Desert Land Trust, PETA, the International Fund for Animal Welfare, and many other conservation groups.

The first stage was traveling to Sacramento to speak in a public hearing held by the Wild Life Committee of the California Assembly, where I spoke, showing on closed circuit video the drawing of our bobcat that Kate, an eleven-year old girl had made at Villa dei Fiori, a moment where I cracked up. The Wildlife Committee set the bill to the floor for a vote and Project Bobcat generated a letter writing campaign that eventually succeeded in the bill being passed by the Assembly, and then to the Senate where Project Bobcat activists had to convince the Senators to pass it, with Democrats generally supporting the bill, and Republicans generally opposing the bill. The Democrats prevailed, and with the endorsement of the Los Angeles Times, and thousands of letters and calls by Project Bobcat, Governor Jerry Brown signed the Bobcat Protection Act AB1213 on October 11, 2013 directing the California Fish and Game Commission to prohibit bobcat trapping adjacent to every national and state park, national monument, and wildlife refuge.



Bobcats are rarely seen in the wild because they are nocturnal, solitary, and elusive.

The battle was not over. The Project Bobcat people were entering the second phase to protect the cats because the bill did not protect the bobcats throughout the state as originally planned. It had been revised to protect them only around the parks, a political compromise made to get enough votes to pass in the legislature. However, with boundaries so vague that it would be impossible to enforce with the limited number of wildlife enforcement officers, the California Fish and Game Commission ordered a series of hearings for testimony in venues over the state. The Project Bobcat supporters attended hearings in Van Nuys, Santa Rosa, Mammoth, and the final one in Fortuna, Northern California. At the hearings, the Bobcats were powerfully represented by a score of women---Jean Su, the Biological Diversity attorney who presented our case to extend the trapping prohibition throughout the state, and Director Camilla Fox's Project Coyote's members who eloquently championed the bobcats, a total of 100 speakers. Thanks to Richard Bloom's Legislative Director, Guy Strahl, who gave up his designated speaking time to me, I delivered the first speech that I had given since the Civil Rights era. Minutes later, the Fish and Game Commission voted 3 to 2 to extend the prohibition on the trapping of bobcats to the entire state of California.



Sphinx hunts in the boulders of Villa dei Fiori.



I-ah-to-tonah and son. Nez Perce Nation, 1909. Photo - Everett Historical

As a child in Oklahoma, I learned that Indians were frugal. They slaughtered only what they could eat and for clothing to keep warm. Nothing went to waste — horns and bones, hide and hair. When Lewis and Clark crossed the plateau west of the Mississippi River, there were 200 million buffalo grazing on the prairie grasslands as far as the eye could see. Soon as the settlers arrived, the killing began---the traders slaughtering 50 million buffaloes every year until only a few hundred survived.

A Cheyenne River Sioux said, "Buffalo have to be there for our culture to exist." That is how people in Joshua Tree feel about the bobcat and the Bighorn sheep. They are the spiritual essence of our land — our icons. The Muskogee Creek Indians, who founded my hometown of Tulsa, had a tribal clan, *Koakotsalgi* — the Bobcat Clan.



Comanche camp illustrated by Duveaux. Photo- Marzolino.

For the American Indians, animals were their totem figures. A totem serves as a symbol for a group of people, a clan, a tribe, and even a person. The totem has powers imbued with the spirit of God. To some tribes, there are taboos against killing clan animals, as humans are kin to the animals whose totems they represent.

In Joshua Tree, our wild animals are our totem figures. We share the same feelings about the bobcat as we do about Mojave tortoise, Chuckwalla iguana, Kit fox, coyote, Road Runner, Hummingbird, Gambel's quail, Great Horned owl, Red-tail hawk, and the regal Big Horn sheep. Our animals, reptiles, and birds form the spiritual essence of our land. Indians believed wild animals were a gift from the Great Spirit. For primitive man, there was no separation between man and the spirits of nature. Everything has a soul. All things are divine.



Watching Sphinx leaping gracefully over the boulders, I learned a lot about movement. If you have ever been in the presence of a bobcat, you would recognize how noble they are — sublime creatures with the power and grace of a dancer. Many nights she would sit on the rock across from my window while I was writing *Céline on Fire*. I've taken her death hard. I grieve for Sphinx — the noble animal who gave life to my land.





Sphinx in the last year of her life.