ABSTRACT

Bobcat harvest and population trends were analyzed using registration forms, questionnaires to hunters and trappers, and winter track counts. Registration totals showed no prolonged trends from 1973-81 on a statewide basis, except for a major decline within the North Central District beginning in 1977. Registration information indicated sex ratios differed significantly in relation to harvest method. Proportionately more females were taken by trapping and other methods compared to hunting. However, the accuracy of sex ratio data is questionable without carefully examining skinned carcasses.

Questionnaire data also showed no major trends in bobcat abundance, although hunters' and trappers' opinions suggested there was a slight increase for 1979-81. Over an 8-year period, trappers took 45% of their bobcats incidental to coyote trapping, 49% in bobcat sets, and 6% in other types of sets.

Winter track counts produced highly variable results that correlated poorly with harvests. Counts in Iron County showed no major trends, but in Oneida County a decline in track abundance corresponded to a decline in harvest beginning in 1977. Cover types at track locations showed bobcats generally favor lowland conifers.

Considering all data sources, the statewide population was judged to be relatively stable from 1973-81. Recommendations include: 1) continue the current monitoring program, which now includes collecting age and reproductive data from carcasses; and 2) maintain conservative season structures that have produced an average annual harvest of 200 or fewer bobcats.

INTRODUCTION

Bobcats were unprotected in Wisconsin until 1970, and through 1964 the Wisconsin Conservation Department paid a $5 bounty. Increasing concern about the population status of the bobcat plus the desire to elevate it to game animal status led to the establishment of a 5 1/2-month season in 1970. The season was progressively shortened over the years to the current 2-month period (Table 1). In 1980, a seasonal bag limit of 1 bobcat was set, hunters and trappers were required to apply for possession tags prior to the season opening, and bobcats were protected south of State Highway 64.

The objective of this study was to develop a system for monitoring statewide bobcat population trends and test track count surveys to determine bobcat abundance. A preliminary study in 1973-74 examined bobcat distribution, relative numbers, and habitat conditions (Creed and Ashbrenner 1976). The project staff analyzed bounty and registration records, hunter-trapper questionnaires, and bobcat harvests relative to forest types and snowshoe hare abundance. At that time, we concluded that bobcats were secure in Wisconsin, but we recommended additional research on population status.

In 1976, we began an accelerated effort to test track count surveys and questionnaires, and analyze registration data. This report covers the 1976-82 activities, but earlier data are often incorporated (Creed and Ashbrenner 1976; Klepinger et al. 1979). Corrections in harvest data are included where delinquent registration reports have been received.