

# Your Side of the fence



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## Mountain Lions in Oklahoma?

By Erik Bartholomew, furbearer biologist



**P***uma concolor*, the cat of one color, has caught the attention of many Oklahomans recently. ODWC

1940's throughout the state. In 1953, Bryan P. Glass, mammologist with Oklahoma State University, found tracks southeast of Canton Lake. Since 2004, there have been 11 confirmed mountain lion reports in Oklahoma.

Most recently, a 3-year-old male was struck and killed by a car near

island of habitat in a sea of prairie, and when there are too many animals living in a confined area, they set off in search of new territory.

Many neighboring states, including Kansas and Missouri, have documented evidence of mountain lions moving through their states as well. You may have also seen the news article of a mountain lion killed in Connecticut on a highway that traveled through Minnesota and Wisconsin, which originated in the Black Hills regions.

Researchers in the Black Hills have documented radio-collared cats traveling into North Dakota, Canada and western Montana.

Mountain lions are found from the tip of South America north into the Canadian Rockies.

### What was that?

Oklahoma has two, native wild cats, the bobcat (*Lynx rufus*) and the mountain lion. A mountain lion's most distinguishing characteristic is its long tail, which

has confirmed several sightings since 2004. The mountain lion, also known as panther, puma, or cougar was once found throughout the United States including Oklahoma.

In 1765, French explorer Brevel reported seeing mountain lions in the Wichita Mountains. Mountain lions were once found throughout the United States, and with westward expansion, the mountain lions primary food source, deer, and mountain lions themselves, were hunted to near extinction in much of the eastern United States. By 1900, mountain lions were considered extirpated from Oklahoma, but scattered reports and confirmations of mountain lions have occurred since the mid-



*Erik Bartholomew, furbearer biologist for the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation, takes the rare opportunity to conduct research on the mountain lion, which was hit on HWY 81 north of Minco in November. Photo by Michael Bergin.*

the town of Minco on November 2, 2011. This cat weighed 130 pounds, was in good health, and had a single porcupine quill in its stomach. Genetic tests link this animal to the Black Hills of South Dakota.

The Black Hills are essentially an

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Conservation Mission Statement:

Managing Oklahoma's wildlife resources and habitat to provide scientific, educational, aesthetic, economic, and recreational benefits for present and future generations of hunters, anglers, and others who appreciate wildlife.

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is nearly two-thirds the length of its body. Many people report bobcats thinking they are mountain lions; however, there are several characteristics that set them apart. A bobcat is 3 feet long and has a short tail, whereas as a mountain lion is nearly 8 feet - including the tail. A mountain lion is one color of tawny to light gray and has a white belly. A bobcat is spotted on the back and belly. A mountain lion has a black tipped tail, back of ears and muzzle, whereas a bobcat has a white tipped tail, back of ears, and muzzle.

Sightings are often a case of mistaken identity. Pictures of yellow labrador retrievers, black house cats, tawny house cats, bobcats, and even deer have been submitted as mountain lion sightings.

### Are there black mountain lions?

The short answer is no. There has never been a black mountain lion in captivity, taken while hunting or documented by researchers anywhere in North America. There are no native black cats in North America. The closest relatives to mountain lions are the Jaguarondis that are found in southern Mexico and Central America. They are smaller and dark grey or brown. Additionally, jaguars found in Mexico and throughout Central and South America have the ability to be melanistic, or very dark in color. These two species have never been documented this far north.

While occasional visitors to Oklahoma, there has been no documentation of mountain lions reproducing in our state. However, with increasing confirmed sightings it is possible that some areas of Oklahoma have resident mountain lions. Areas with rugged, rocky habitat and plenty of tree and shrub cover have the potential to become a permanent home for these large cats. ■

## Checking Tracks



### Mountain Lion

1. Claw marks are generally absent. Appear sharp and narrow if present.
2. Four tear-drop shaped toes, grouped asymmetrically.
3. Trapezoidal-shaped heel pad
4. Three-lobed heel pad with two indentations along rear margin.



### Dog

1. Toenail prints generally present, and will be broad and blunt.
2. Four, round-shaped toes, grouped symmetrically.
3. Triangular-shaped heel pad.
4. Heel pad lacks distinct indentations and three-lobed appearance.

# Landowner Spotlight

## Landowners Resurrect Their History

By Jena Donnell, quail habitat biologist



Larry and Carolyn Lockwood have spent several years in Cherokee County, living on a farm and enjoying the hunting opportunities in the woodlands of Cherokee and Adair counties. Though much of the surrounding area is now dominated by closed-canopy timber, they remember when

fire was regularly set to the woods and native grasses grew underneath the thinned oaks.

In an effort to return their property to the landscape they remember, the Lockwood's became involved with the Quail Habitat Restoration Initiative—a Natural Resources Conservation Service program with the Wildlife Department. They enrolled 850 acres in the program and have received financial assistance to build firebreaks, conduct prescribed burns, reduce tree cover and plant native grasses.

“The scattered oak trees with a native grass understory are what I remember the country looking like while I was growing up,” said Mr. Lockwood. “It was well worth the manual labor, time and sweat.”

Some of the Lockwood's first tasks were to create firebreaks and conduct a prescribed burn when the project began in 2007. Because the property borders land operated by The Nature Conservancy (TNC), they were able to join forces with TNC staff to complete the burn (working with neighboring

landowners is often the best way to manage wildlife habitat; the more acres maintained or restored, the better). More recently, the Lockwood's have been working to reduce the tree canopy cover. Using a Case 550 dozer, Mr. Lockwood has become a one-man thinning crew. He leaves select trees instead of clearing the land.

“I like red oaks,” said Mr. Lockwood. “I try to leave the mature, healthy red oaks and a few post oaks, and then remove the rest.”

The scattered oak habitat is great for several wildlife species—including bobwhite quail, wild turkey and whitetail deer.



*Mr. and Mrs. Lockwood on their land in Cherokee County. Photo by Jena Donnell.*

While thinning the canopy certainly takes a lot of work, managing the resulting savannah or woodland conditions is an equally challenging task.

“Others in this area need to be maintained regularly and the canopy thinned,” advised Mr. Lockwood. “This is brush-growing country. If you don't burn or remove the

understory mechanically, in four or five years, it will be just like it was.”

Though they are still waiting for a response in quail, the Lockwood's are hopeful the quail will soon use the restored native grasses for nesting cover. While quail are slower to respond to habitat restoration, they are seeing an improvement in other wildlife.

“I see more deer now that the area is thinned, and they seem to like it better,” said Mr. Lockwood. ■

# Water Matters

## Build it Right: Planning for a Recreational Pond

By Kody Moore, former fisheries technician, current Delaware County game warden



**B**uilding a pond in Oklahoma that meets the goals of the owner can be tricky business. The problem for many is determining the priorities for that pond, because the multiple uses Oklahoma ponds have can often compete with one another. For instance, typical farm ponds that are used for

watering livestock and irrigating crops rarely make for quality recreational fishing ponds because they are often very turbid or murky. It is important to prioritize the uses of the pond and then stick to those priorities when building. Before making important decisions about your pond, contact your local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) office for technical assistance.

If the purpose of the pond is decided to be a recreational fishery the next step is to pick a location to construct the dam. The most economical locations are those located in a narrow section of a valley so the dam material required is not excessive, but also provides a large area above the dam to be flooded. Fishing ponds should be a minimum of half an acre. NRCS personnel can help determine the size of the pond and the dam based on the available watershed.

The selected area should be soil tested to make sure it will hold water. The best soils for holding water are

clay or silty-clay, and the worst are sandy or gravelly soils. There should be a layer of this soil deep enough to prevent leakage and should continue under the entire area to be flooded. After the location has been selected and the soil has been tested, construction can begin. The dam can be constructed using fill dirt taken out of the area to be flooded after a clay foundation has been constructed. The pond's dam should be constructed at a slope of three feet out for every one foot down. There should not be any large,

shallow areas, because these will promote the growth of undesirable aquatic plants. The NRCS recommends a minimum pond depth of 6 to 7 feet in eastern Oklahoma and a minimum of 10 to 12 feet in western Oklahoma. These minimums are to maintain the water necessary to account for evaporation and seepage in those climates. The water level should be



*Creating a dam with a three-to-one slope will help prevent excess vegetation after the pond fills. Photo by Greg Ritzman, Natural Resource Conservation Service.*

determined and regulated by a spillway which has a fish barrier. The barrier should be made of horizontal bars spaced one inch apart and will prevent the loss of fish during high flow events. Wherever possible a bottom drain with a controllable valve should be constructed to conduct drawdowns. Bottom drains will come in handy to control excess vegetation and manage fish populations.



*Brush piles are good fish attractors, but are temporary and should be replaced. Photo by Greg Ritzman, NRCS.*

Before the pond fills, create structures for the fish. Constructed piles of rock or brush are an easy way to concentrate fish for angling. Brush piles are temporary and have to be replaced every few years. In recent

years, artificial brush piles called “spider blocks” have become popular. They can be purchased or made with a cinder block, a few pieces of polyethylene pipe and concrete.



Place spider blocks in a newly constructed pond before the pond is filled. Photo by [wildlifedepartment.com](http://wildlifedepartment.com).

Mark fish structures so anglers know where they should concentrate their fishing efforts. Grasses, rip rap, or rocks, should be planted or placed along the shoreline to prevent erosion. Livestock should be excluded from a fishing pond because they cause erosion and silting problems.

Once the pond is flooded, fish populations can be introduced. It is important to determine the kind of fishery desired and manage the pond to produce the desired results. Most recreational farm ponds are managed for a balance of bluegill, bass and channel catfish. For every surface acre of the pond, 500 fingerling bluegill and 100 fingerling catfish should be added. The following spring 100 largemouth bass per acre can be added. The bluegill will provide a good



ODWC provides free fish to newly constructed pond owners with a valid fishing license. Photo by [wildlifedepartment.com](http://wildlifedepartment.com).

forage base for the bass, and the lag time before the bass are added will give them a chance to grow large enough to escape predation and spawn one or two times before the bass are large enough to eat them. Consult your regional

Wildlife Department fisheries biologist listed on page two to determine the suitability of introducing other fish species.

Frequent pond maintenance provides better longevity for a pond. The barrier will have to be periodically cleaned to ensure water can still pass through. It is important to make sure that there are not any trees allowed to grow on the dam because the roots cause voids in the dam material. When the trees die and rot away, an opening is created which can lead to leaks. Beavers or other burrowing animals should not be allowed to take up residence in the dam because they too create voids in the dam material, causing it to fail. If a fishery is properly managed it will continue to provide quality fishing for years.

The Wildlife Department’s recommendations for management can be found in the publication *Managing Pond Fisheries in Oklahoma* available at regional offices or at [wildlifedepartment.com](http://wildlifedepartment.com). ■



Preston Berg fishing in a farm pond. Photo by Colin Berg.

# Landowner News

## Second Annual Prescribed Fire Council Meeting

By Mike Sams, private lands senior biologist



**M**ark your calendars for May 8 to attend the Second Annual Oklahoma Prescribed Fire Council

Meeting at the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge. The Council is composed of private landowners and numerous conservation agencies with the mission to "promote the implementation of prescribed fire in Oklahoma as a natural resource management tool."

"Presentations on the agenda include Vegetative Response to Fire and Grazing and Hoofed Mammals' Response to Patchy Fire, to name a few," said John Weir, Council chairman.



Prescribed burn in Oklahoma. Photo by Ben Davis.

Ron Volt with the Prairie Heritage Alliance will provide an update on the Oklahoma Prescribed Burn Association (OPBA). The principle goal of OPBA is to become an umbrella organization for landowners and local prescribed fire associations to improve access to reasonably priced liability insurance. Many landowners have cited liability

as the main reason for not using fire as a management tool. By serving as an umbrella organization, OPBA can negotiate group rate insurance to cover cost associated with fire escape.

Registration begins at 8 a.m. and the meeting will begin at 8:30 a.m. Registration cost is \$25 at the door (cash or check), which includes lunch.

RSVP by May 3 to [john.weir@okstate.edu](mailto:john.weir@okstate.edu) or (405) 744-5442. More information on the Council and OPBA can be accessed at <http://www.oklahomaprescribedfirecouncil.okstate.edu/index.html>. ■

## Upland Update: Subscribe Today

The Wildlife Department is embarking on a long-term research project on two northwest Oklahoma wildlife management areas to study quail reproductive success and mortality. Sign up for the free, bi-weekly newsletter, *Upland Update*, to stay up-to-date with the latest upland game information.

The Department is also teaming up with a group of partners to conduct a research project that covers the western portion of the northern

bobwhite quail's North American range. The Department will continue ongoing quail conservation efforts across the state through a number of initiatives on both public and private lands.

Log on to [wildlifedepartment.com](http://wildlifedepartment.com)'s Hunting page and click quail to sign up for the *Upland Update* and receive more information on the Wildlife Department's research efforts. ■



Jena Donnell, wildlife biologist, releases a quail after performing research for the Operation Idiopathic Decline project. Photo by [wildlifedepartment.com](http://wildlifedepartment.com).

## Building an Escape Ramp

By RosaLee Walker, farm bill technician



An escape ramp is a simple, easy and highly effective management tool to promote healthy and safe livestock/

wildlife interactions while also decreasing accidental and unnecessary deaths of our state's small animals. Install a wildlife escape ramp in your stock tank to help preserve small mammals, birds and reptiles.

There are several simple, low cost solutions to mitigate the risk of drowning. Piling rocks or logs in a tank can aid wildlife escape; however, installing an escape ramp is the most effective in eliminating mortality in stock tanks.

An economical and easy construction method is made of expanded-metal grating. Use 11- or 13-gauge expanded metal with half-inch mesh to create a ramp with adequate traction. Cut a square of expanded metal (using dimensions from the photos below in reference to your tank height) to construct the ramp. Use the guide below to mark bending points on the metal. Then, bend the metal along the reference lines to create the ramp figure. Heat from a torch and a hammer is helpful when bending the metal. This process is

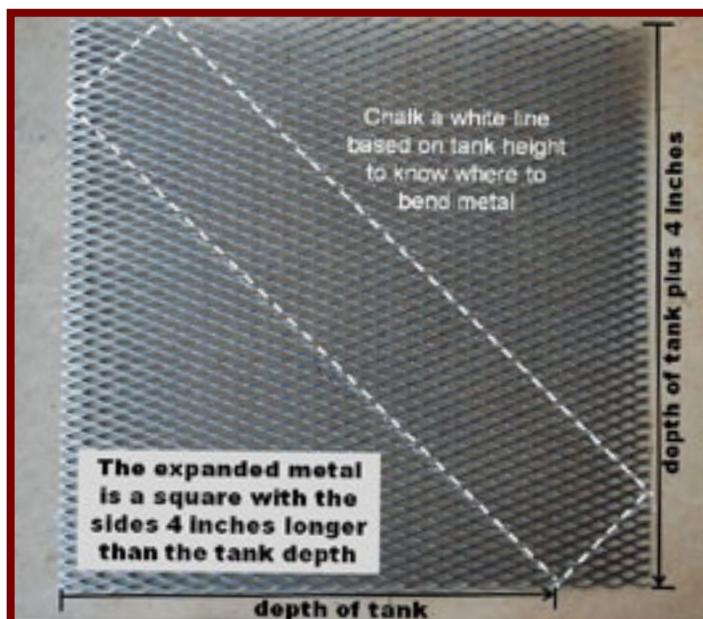
easiest with two people, but you can also clamp the metal to a bench or something sturdy to stabilize the metal while bending it.

To maximize the life of the escape ramp, it should be finished with rust inhibiting paint or coating such as the enamel paint used for farm implements.

After the ramp is constructed, install it into your tank where minimal interference with livestock will occur. Use the top tab that you bent on the ramp to secure the ramp to the lip of the tank. On-site modifications may be necessary to assure the ramp

is adequately secured. Monitor the ramp periodically to make sure the ramp is still in place and functional.

Contact me at (918) 607-1518 or [rosalee\\_walker@rocketmail.com](mailto:rosalee_walker@rocketmail.com) for more information about wildlife escape ramps. Visit [wildlifedepartment.com](http://wildlifedepartment.com) for more tips to help wildlife benefit from your land. ■





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*Photo by Michael Bergin*



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