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OBSERVATION OF A MELANISTIC BOBCAT IN THE OCALA NATIONAL FOREST

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Melanism has been recorded in 13 species of wild cats and is the most common coat variant (Robinson 1978, Alderton 1993). Melanistic bobcats (*Lynx rufus*) have been documented in southern Florida (Hamilton 1941, Ulmer 1941, Paradiso 1973, Laing 1990, Regan and Maehr 1990) and New Brunswick, Canada (Tischendorf and McAlpine 1995). These accounts represent all of the known documented records of melanism in the species.

On 9 September 1990 at ca. 1900 hours while driving south on Forest Road 65 (R26E, T15S, S7) adjacent to Juniper Wilderness in the Ocala National Forest, Marion County, Florida, we observed what we thought was a large black dog standing in the middle of the road at a distance of approximately 50-75 m. When we approached to within 25 m, we discovered that the animal was a melanistic bobcat. From a distance of 10-15 m, we watched the animal limp away on three legs into a thicket of scrub oaks (*Quercus* spp.) and saw palmettos (*Serenoa repens*). After leaving the vehicle and examining the vicinity, we observed a large ca. 1.3 m long eastern diamondback rattlesnake (*Crotalus adamanteus*) coiled and rattling. It seems likely that a confrontation had occurred between the bobcat and the snake which allowed us to approach the cat at close range.

The bobcat appeared to be about three times larger than a domestic cat with a weight estimated to be ca. 11 kg. The tail of the bobcat was very short and did not appear to be as long as the tails of two melanistic bobcats described by Ulmer (1941), which were ≥ 18 cm. We also observed the conspicuous black ear tufts on this bobcat which are characteristic of bobcats. However, Laing (1990) described a melanistic bobcat live-trapped in Polk County, Florida, as lacking small black ear tufts. Several authors have stated that under most light conditions, melanistic bobcats appear to be entirely black but at certain angles faint spotting can be observed (Hamilton 1941, Ulmer 1941, Paradiso 1974, Laing 1990). Based on our short period of observation and low light conditions, the bobcat appeared to be entirely black in coloration and no spots were visible.

This observation increases the northern most record of a melanistic bobcat in Florida by ca. 100 km. Although melanism in bobcats may be most frequent in southern Florida (Regan and Maehr 1990), our observation together with that of Tischendorf and McAlpine (1995) documents its occurrence elsewhere in the range.

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