

To Capture a Predator

Article & photos by Luciano Guerra, South Texas Border Chapter

At the National Butterfly Center (NBC) near Mission, Texas, we had been receiving reports of a bobcat being seen jumping out of the bushes and pouncing on squirrels and large birds in the bird feeding area. Since this was occurring on a daily basis, I decided to make it a priority to see and document this activity for myself. As much as people think that as the NBC's photographer I spend most, if not all, of my time out in the gardens taking pictures, I actually spend much more time in my office working on different projects or helping out with school field trips. That was why I had not had much of an opportunity to try capturing photos of the bobcat myself.

From the reports we were receiving, we decided that this was a female bobcat with nearby kittens to feed. The fact that she was catching several large birds and a squirrel or two on a daily basis, is what led us to come to this conclusion. However, we had no direct knowledge of what she was doing with her kills once she disappeared into the bushes.

On Thursday, April 27 I was in the bird feeding area talking to a group of school kids about birds when the bobcat jumped out of the bushes and grabbed a Great-tailed Grackle. With my back to the action, I did not get a very good view of this predator/prey interaction at all. Had it not been for the reaction of the school kids and their teacher, who had a great view of what had just transpired, I would probably have missed the whole thing all together. As it turns out, all I got to see was the bobcat, with a mouth full of grackle, heading back into the bushes.

The following morning, we did not have a school field trip scheduled and I did not have a project deadline looming. Consequently I decided to head out to the bird feeding area before the morning feeding just in case the bobcat made another appearance. I also decided that as long as I was going to be taking photos, I might as well set up my cell phone on a tripod and try to get slow-motion video as well. I did so for two reasons. First of all, I anticipated this being the kind of action that would be much more dramatic in slow-motion video than in still photos. Second of all, I did not know if I would be quick enough to capture the anticipated action with my camera. And even if I would be, I knew that there would always be the chance of the photos being out of focus since I did not know exactly where the action would be taking place.

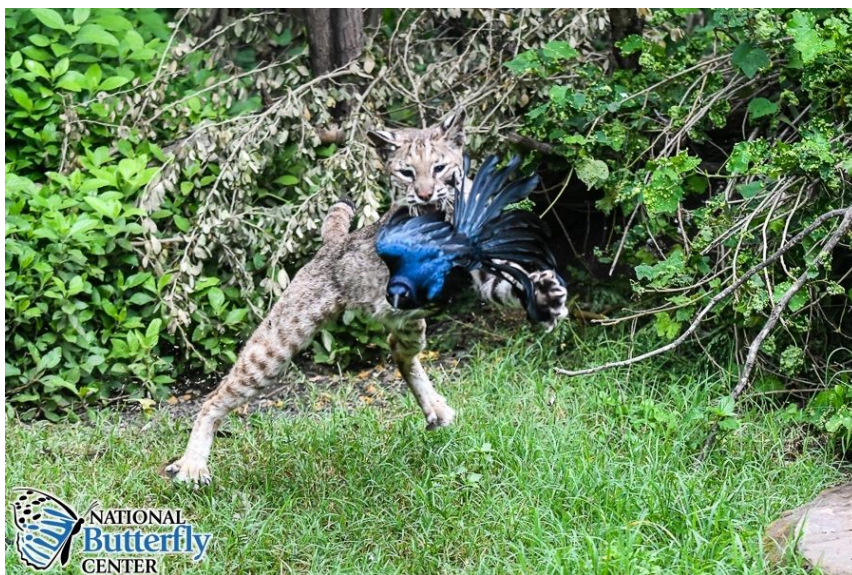
As I sat on one of the picnic tables visitors usually sit at in the bird feeding area, I watched as Omar fed the birds that morning. It didn't take long at all for the birds to start coming in to feed. From what I had been told by those fortunate enough to see the bobcat in action before, and from what I had personally witnessed the day before, I knew that the bobcat usually waited for either a large bird, such as a grackle, a dove or a chachalaca, or a squirrel to move into the "kill zone," the patch of grass directly in front of the bushes, before pouncing. That was why my strategy was to start shooting video, and get ready to take photos, as soon as a large bird or squirrel approached the area.

After a couple of false alarms, a male Great-tailed Grackle flew in and landed on a large flat rock, that is part of a water feature, directly in front of the bushes. I knew that this could be exactly what I, and the bobcat, had been waiting for. Sure enough, after hesitating for a bit, the bird obliged us both by hopping down off the rock and onto the grass. That was when it happened. Almost instantaneously, as the bird's feet hit the grass, the bobcat made its soon-to-be-deadly move.

Having not given any indication of its presence up to this point, the predator burst out of the bushes, in what I could only make out through my camera's viewfinder to be a brown blur, and leapt at the grackle as it took flight in a desperate attempt at escaping. The action was so fast and furious that all I could do was to keep my camera pointed in the general direction of the action, while keeping my finger pressed down on the shutter release and fire off a burst of shots at 10 frames per second.

As I continued shooting the photos, I noticed in-between shots that the bobcat was no longer visible in my viewfinder. Apparently, it had leapt so fast and so far that I had not been able to follow the action. That was when I took my finger off the shutter release and I looked to see where it had gone, first through my viewfinder and then by peering over my camera to get a wider view. That was when I saw the cat, with the now dead grackle in its mouth, staring me down. It was almost as if she was daring me to try taking the bird away from her. Or possibly even double-dog daring me.

By the time I was able to recompose a shot with the bobcat in it, she was heading back toward the bushes. While I did take several photos of her disappearing into the foliage, I was anxious to see what, if any of the action I had actually managed to capture. I really had no idea at this point if I had captured anything worthwhile or not.



Much to my surprise, excitement, I did get the three shots I am sharing here; the first one being my favorite. To me it almost looks like a photo of a bobcat and its prey that have been posed by a taxidermist.

The second photo is almost as good, but would probably be better viewed from a different angle.



As for the third photo, I like how it shows how high the bobcat had to leap to catch the grackle and how large its front paws are when fully open, but in my opinion it's not as good a shot as the first two.



In closing, I feel fortunate to have been in the right place at the right time to capture what I consider to be these shots of my lifetime. Luck had very little to do with the taking of these photos. It was much more a matter of my years of experience photographing wildlife and the fact that the bobcat had made a habit of using the National Butterfly Center's bird feeding area as its own personal all-you-can eat (and feed to your kittens) buffet. This experience and habit allowed me to anticipate what the bobcat was about to do and document it with photos and video. For anyone interested in watching my video, visit the National Butterfly Center's Facebook page and scroll down to the post I shared on April 28. It's quite an amazing thing to watch.