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## Texas Ocelot: America's 'Little Leopard'

### The Texas Ocelot Fights for Survival

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In her 20 years of studying ocelots in south Texas, Environmental Defense wildlife expert Linda Laack has seen but a handful of these hard-to-spot cats in the wild. "When I was a graduate student, I had recently radio-collared a beautiful female ocelot," Laack tells of one unforgettable close encounter.

"I was following her movements one night, when she suddenly poked her head out of the heavy brush and casually looked around and walked out to the edge of the road and sat down. I couldn't believe my good fortune in seeing her, but imagine my elation when moments later her kitten leapt from the brush onto the mother's back and began wrestling with her!"

So rare are these secretive, nocturnal cats that few Americans have ever seen one in the wild. These beautiful smaller cousins of leopards are native to south Texas and northeastern Mexico. The graceful animals are highly endangered on both sides of the Rio Grande, threatened by development, habitat loss and inbreeding.

Today, only 100 or so ocelots are thought to be left in the United States. Most of these hold out on a wildlife refuge and small patches of private lands in Texas's Lower Rio Grande Valley. Here, these cats live in dense thickets of thornscrub that thrive in the area's loamy clay soil.

### Disappearing habitat threatens these rarest of creatures

When Spanish explorer Alonzo Alvarez de Pineda arrived in the Rio Grande Valley nearly 500 years ago, he found a landscape quite different from what it is today. The 3 million acres of coastal savannas and brushlands were thick with wildlife – ocelots, jaguarundis and jaguars, Texas tortoises, javelinas, bobcats, coyotes and bison. This crossroads between temperate and tropical climates attracted flocks of migrating waterfowl and songbirds, as it does today: for example, hawks, sandhill cranes, green jays and northern aplomado falcons (these falcons had disappeared by the 1950s and were restored to Texas after a 43-year absence).

Today, this oasis wilderness has shrunk to but a shadow of itself. Now, the valley is a patchwork of citrus farms and cattle ranches, urban sprawl from nearby Brownsville and crisscrossing roadways. Tragically, Texas

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Someday the ocelot may join the aplomado falcon as one of the south Texas species brought back from the edge of extinction.

ocelots have lost most of their historic habitat -- over 95% of the thornscrub in the Tamaulipan Biotic Province -- the area straddling the Texas-Mexico border -- has been removed.

### **Surviving on small patches of scrubland, in small isolated groups**

At one time the Texas ocelot's range extended as far away as Louisiana and Arkansas in the United States and farther southwest into Coahuila, Mexico, and along the Gulf Coast in Tamaulipas. Ranchers began settling into the area in the 19th century and cleared land for cattle grazing.

In the 1930s, in south Texas, large-scale brush clearing to convert lands to cropland took a steep toll on the cats' habitat, hemming them in on increasingly smaller patches of land. Enterprising farmers were anxious to scrape the brambles off the land to exploit the fertile soil of the Rio Grande delta.

The tiny fraction of ocelot habitat that remains is largely fragmented, leaving most ocelots stranded on the 45,000-acre [Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge](#) and on a handful of private lands, with very little new habitat for the cats to raise future generations. Because the south Texas ocelots are found in such small and isolated groups, they tend to inbreed, making them increasingly vulnerable to extinction.

### **Too many ocelots killed on roads**

Ocelot populations have also been hard hit by the dense network of roadways and highways that have come with the area's rapid urbanization in recent years. Ocelots must cross roads to reach another area of desirable habitat, and too many do not reach the other side.

"More ocelots die from being hit by cars and trucks than from any other cause," said Environmental Defense wildlife expert, Karen Chapman. "On two particularly dangerous stretches of highway, around 10 ocelots have been killed over the course of several years." The Fish and Wildlife Service is working with the Department of Transportation to get more underpasses so ocelots can move safely to other patches of habitat.

### **Hope for survival**

Despite the odds, there is hope for ocelots in the Rio Grande Valley. More and more landowners are seeing the benefits of restoring brush on their lands to help these rare beautiful creatures. A return to native thornscrub draws more game species like quail and deer. Restoring native brush helps native birds like green jays and chachalacas as well as migratory birds like warblers and orioles.

Chapman works with farmers and ranchers near Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, getting them to commit to helping ocelots and to restore thornscrub by planting seedlings, the first step in recovery efforts. The near-term goal is to bring back native vegetation to about 500 acres (about 4/5 of one square mile). "It's a slow process, but every little bit of restored habitat helps," says Chapman. "Five hundred acres can support a breeding pair of ocelots."

Environmental Defense has also teamed up with the Nature Conservancy of Texas and Pronatura, Noreste of Mexico. "Times are changing. We have great collaboration among conservation groups, landowners and government agencies, all working toward the same goal," said Chapman. "This may be the key to the Texas ocelot's recovery."

### **FIND OUT MORE**

- Two Cool Cats: [The Ocelot and the Jaguarundi in South Texas and Northeastern Mexico \[PDF\]](#)  
- Facts, Issues and Recovery Efforts
- Ocelot Nation: [New Program to Save Endangered Cats Spans the U.S.-Mexican Border](#)
- *The Mammals of Texas* by Dr. William B. Davis and Dr. David J. Schmidly — Online Edition (8/26/03), the [ocelot](#) and [jaguarundi](#)
- Texas Parks & Wildlife Department -- [The threatened and endangered ocelo](#)

### The Ocelot: *Leopardus pardalis*

This small cat weighs 15-30 pounds and averages 3 feet 9 inches in length. Its coat has black spots, bars, and stripes on a rich tan to gray background, with irregular black dots on a white underside and dark bars on the tail. The more numerous bobcat (*Lynx rufus*) has a longer tail, heavier, larger spots and more rounded ears.

The ocelot is located in Mexico, Central America and South America. The subspecies in Texas and northern Mexico is *L. pardalis albescens*. Another subspecies, *L. pardalis sonoriensis* occurs in northern Sonora, Mexico, and may wander into Arizona at times.

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