

FINAL REPORT

As Required by

THE ENDANGERED SPECIES PROGRAM

TEXAS

Grant No. TX E-119-RL

Endangered and Threatened Species Conservation

Habitat Conservation for Ocelot Population in South Texas

Prepared by:

Sonia Najera



Carter Smith
Executive Director

Clayton Wolf
Director, Wildlife

9 December 2010

FINAL REPORT

STATE: Texas **GRANT NUMBER:** TX E-119-RL

GRANT TITLE: **Habitat Conservation for Ocelot Population in South Texas**

REPORTING PERIOD: 1 Sep 09 to 8 Dec 10

OBJECTIVE(S):

To acquire a conservation easement on approximately 1,242 -acres, subject to survey, on the Yturria Ranch to protect and enhance habitat of the federally-listed endangered ocelot and other globally-rare species.

Segment Objectives:

- 1). Upon a successful grant award, the Conservancy will negotiate the terms of the conservation easement with the landowner and submit the negotiated easement for state and federal review.
- 2). A survey of the subject property identifying the parcels of the easement will be contracted and drafted.
- 3) A qualified appraiser will be commissioned to conduct an appraisal according to federal appraisal standards. Once approved, an appraisal review will be undertaken if necessary.
- 4). A notice of just compensation will be sent to the landowner.
- 5). Draft a purchase agreement and closing documents, order title review.
- 6). An Environmental Assessment and Easement Documentation Report will be prepared.

Significant Deviations:

None.

Summary Of Progress:

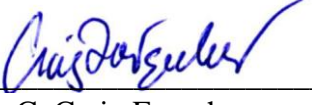
Please see Attachment A.

Location: Kenedy and Willacy Counties, Texas.

Cost: Costs were not available at time of this report, they will be available upon completion of the Final Report and conclusion of the project.

Prepared by: Craig Farquhar

Date: 9 December 2010

Approved by:  Date: 9 December 2010
C. Craig Farquhar

Attachment A

Final Report Submitted to Texas Parks & Wildlife Department

FWS Section 6 Recovery Land Acquisition Grant

TPWD Agreement No. 212351

**1,300-Acre Conservation Easement on the San Francisco Ranch
Kenedy & Willacy Counties, Texas**



By

Sonia Najera

South Texas / Laguna Madre Program Manager

The Nature Conservancy

15 January 2010

Objective: To acquire by conservation easement approximately 1,242 acres, subject to survey, on the Yturria Ranch to protect and enhance habitat of federally-listed endangered ocelot (*Leopardus pardalis*) and other globally-rare species.

Background: This Non-traditional Section 6 grant awarded to the Nature Conservancy in the Spring of 2009 was originally intended for the acquisition in fee, of ocelot habitat in Cameron County within the Ranchito Corridor. However, after the submission of that proposal, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) entered into an agreement with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to acquire key tracts as mitigation for constructing the Border Fence that destroyed sections of the wildlife corridor along the Rio Grande. The Arrango tract, the focus of the Conservancy's Ranchito Corridor proposal, was listed as a high priority for acquisition using DHS funding. As a result, we changed the focus of the project to the San Francisco Ranch in Willacy and Kenedy Counties to further previous conservation efforts. Currently, DHS & USFWS are negotiating terms for using mitigation funding for acquisition and the Arrango tract has been appraised.

The San Francisco Ranch is located in the El Jardin and San Perlita Conservation Area. This Conservation Area is one of only two known breeding sites for endangered ocelots in South Texas. El Jardin and San Perlita also represent the names of two conservation easements owned by the USFWS since 1991. The two easements totaling 481-acres support dense thornscrub habitat. The land separating the easements was the focus of a Non-traditional Section 6 grant in 2007, where 697 acres were acquired to expand protected ocelot habitat.



Figure 1. Photo taken of ocelot in TNC conservation easement purchased in 2007.

Photo credit - USFWS

Project: The San Francisco tract is part of the greater Yturria Ranch that spans both Willacy and Kenedy Counties in South Texas. Vegetative communities in this area include South Texas Sand Sheet Oak woodlands, Southern Great Plains and Mixedgrass Prairie, and Tamaulipan Mixed Deciduous Shrublands.

The ocelot and other rare cats have been the focus of conservation efforts since the late 1980's when the Recovery Plan was first released. Additionally, the ocelot and its habitat were identified as a conservation target in the Conservancy's Laguna Madre Conservation Area Plan of 2001 and in the Tamaulipan Ecoregional Plan currently being developed. Land protection, corridor development and reforestation of altered landscapes are all strategies that have ranked high for ocelot conservation. Researchers have estimated that less than 1% of the available habitat in South Texas is suitable ocelot habitat and that documented breeding of ocelots is occurring in only two distinct areas, at El Jardin and San Perlita and about 20 miles south at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. There have been 11 individual ocelots documented in the last two years at the El Jardin and San Perlita Conservation Area. Satellite telemetry data show that ocelots are mainly utilizing the USFWS conservation easements and adjoining grasslands and brush in the Conservancy's 2007 easement that separates the two. However, trip camera photos taken by researchers show that ocelots are also utilizing the brush and oak mott on the north and eastern portion of the San Francisco Ranch and ocelots have historically been captured on the ranch east of the San Francisco.

The Yturria tract is on flat to gently rolling topography at the southern tip of the South Texas Holocene Sand Sheet. Flatter portions, mostly in the western part of the site, are underlain by sands and loams that probably represent the base plain of the region. More rolling hills in the east are composed of windblown clay or sand-clay mix. Soils range from somewhat poorly drained fine sandy loams on the base plain to well drained fine sandy loams on loma slopes. Small depressional wetlands are common on the base plain; soils in those sites are heavy dark clay. Much of the heavy brush vegetation on the Yturria Tract have been cleared due to previous management, but scattered strips and motts of dense mesquite - granjeno (*Prosopis glandulosa* - *Celtis pallida*) woodlands and large mesquite and Texas ebony (*Ebenopsis ebano*) and Vasey's adelia (*Adelia vaseyi*) can still be found. The grasslands are dominated by native trichloris (*Trichloris pluriflora*), and old world exotic grasses, native forbs and many of the woody species that characterize the best ocelot habitat are found scattered within open grassland. Other habitats that exist within this region include oak mottes with large live oaks (*Quercus fusiformes*) and a large population of Baileys ballmoss (*Tillandsia baileyi*); thornscrub brush and depressional wetlands which provide a mosaic of habitat for resident wildlife and migratory birds.

Accomplishments: The Nature Conservancy successfully negotiated and acquired a 1,300 acre conservation easement on the eastern edge of the San Francisco Ranch. This easement was acquired as a bargain sale with the landowner agreeing to sell more acres than originally proposed and donating almost

half of the value of the entire transaction. This easement adjoins the Conservancy's conservation easement acquired in 2007 and is in close proximity to the conservation easements held by USFWS. All four easements combined protect approximately 2,470 acres of habitat for globally rare species, South Texas wildlife and migratory birds.

The project closed and was filed for recording in Willacy and Kennedy Counties on 28 December 2009. All documents related to the successful development of the conservation easement (including revised project statement, revised budget, appraisal, review appraisal, just compensation letter to landowners, conservation easement documentation and inter-local contract between Texas Parks & Wildlife Department and the Conservancy) were delivered and approved by TPWD and USFWS, prior to closing.

We continue to work with the Yturria Family in identifying other tracts that will connect these easements with habitat further north, east and west. These additional tracts will add value to the existing easements and may qualify for future grants. We continue to work with Farm Services Agency and other groups in developing long term conservation agreements on agriculture land on the southern border and further south of the San Francisco Ranch. These long term conservation agreements are geared towards developing a travel corridor between Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge and the conservation easements on the San Francisco Ranch.