

Ocelot

Scientific Name: *Leopardus pardalis*

Federal Status: Endangered, 3/30/72 • State Status: Endangered

Description

The Ocelot is a beautiful medium-sized spotted cat with body dimensions similar to the bobcat (30-41 inches long and 15-30 lbs). Its body coloration is variable; with the upper parts gray or buff with dark brown or black spots, small rings, blotches, and short bars. A key feature is the parallel stripes running down the nape of the neck. The under parts are white spotted with black. The Ocelot's long tail is ringed or marked with dark bars on the upper surface. The backs of the rounded ears are black with a white central spot.



Ocelot
© USFWS Tom Smylie



Ocelot kittens
© USFWS Linda Laack

Habitat

In Texas, Ocelots occur in the dense thorny shrub lands of the Lower Rio Grande Valley and Rio Grande Plains. Deep, fertile clay or loamy soils are generally needed to produce suitable habitat. Typical habitat consists of mixed brush species such as spiny hackberry, brasil, desert yaupon, wolfberry, lotebush, amargosa, white-

brush, catclaw, blackbrush, lantana, guayacan, cenizo, elbowbush, and Texas persimmon. Interspersed trees such as mesquite, live oak, ebony, and hackberry may also occur.

Canopy cover and density of shrubs are important considerations in identifying suitable habitat. Optimal habitat has at least 95% canopy cover of shrubs, whereas marginal habitat has 75-95% canopy cover. Shrub density below the six foot level is the most important component of Ocelot habitat. Shrub density should be such that the depth of vision from outside the brush line is restricted to about five feet. Because of the density of brush below the six foot level, human movement within the brush stand would often be restricted to crawling.

Tracts of at least 100 acres of isolated dense brush, or 75 acres of brush interconnected with other habitat tracts by brush corridors, are considered very important. Even brush tracts as small as 5 acres, when adjacent to larger areas of habitat, may be used by Ocelots. Roads, narrow water bodies, and rights-of-way are not considered barriers to movement. Brushy fence lines, water courses, and other brush strips connecting areas of habitat are very important.

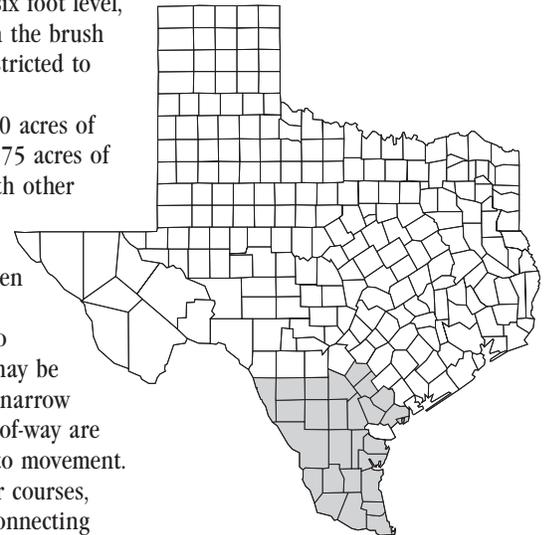
Historical records indicate that the Ocelot once occurred throughout south Texas, the southern Edwards Plateau Region, and along the Coastal Plain. Over the years, the Ocelot population declined primarily due to loss of habitat and predator control activities. Today, Texas counties that contain areas identified as occupied habitat are: Cameron, Duval, Hidalgo, Jim Wells, Kenedy, Kleberg, Live Oak, McMullen, Nueces, San Patricio, Starr, Willacy, and Zapata.

Life History

Ocelots normally begin their activities at dusk, when they set out on nightly hunts for rabbits, small rodents, and birds. They move around during the night, usually within a well-established home range (area of activity) of one

to two square miles for females and three to four square miles for males. Most mornings they bed down in a different spot within the territory. Male Ocelots tend to travel more than females. Males generally cover an extensive area in a short time, whereas females cover less area but use the home range more intensively.

Female Ocelots occupy a den for their kittens in thick brush or dense bunchgrass areas surrounded by brush. The den is often a slight depression with the dead leaves and mulch scraped away. The usual litter size is one or two kittens. The



mother goes off to hunt at night, but spends each day at the den site. The kittens begin to accompany their mother on hunts at about 3 months of age. They stay with her until they are about a year old. Studies have shown that kittens are born from late spring through December.

Threats and Reasons for Decline

Historically, the South Texas Plains supported grassland or savanna-type climax vegetation with dense mixed brush along dry washes and flood plains of the Rio Grande. The extensive shrub lands of the Lower Rio Grande Valley have been converted to agriculture and urban development

over the past 60 years. Much of this land, particularly the more fertile soils, has been cleared for production of vegetables, citrus, sugarcane, cotton, and other crops. Unfortunately for the Ocelot, the best soil types also grow the thickest brush and thus produce the best habitat. Less than 5% of the original vegetation remains in the Rio Grande Valley.

Only about 1% of the South Texas area supports what is currently defined as optimal habitat. Most of this habitat occurs in scattered patches probably too small to support Ocelots for extended periods. As a result, young cats dispersing from areas of suitable habitat have no place to go and most are probably hit by cars or die of disease or starvation. Road mortality is a more recent reason for decline. As Ocelot habitat in South Texas becomes fragmented by bigger highways with faster traffic, Ocelots have become increasingly vulnerable to being struck by vehicles while crossing roads. About half of the Ocelot mortality documented in the past 20 years has been from road mortality.

The Ocelot population in Texas is very small, probably no more than 80 to 120 individuals. Approximately 30 to 35 live in the chaparral remaining at or near the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. Unless vigorous conservation measures are taken soon, this beautiful cat may join the list of species extirpated from the United States.

Recovery Efforts

Much information has been obtained recently concerning Ocelot biology in south Texas. However, there is still much to be learned regarding reproduction, rearing of young, dispersal, home range, and movements. Efforts to inform landowners and the public about the habitat needs, land management options, and biology of the Ocelot are critical to recovery.

Conservation of remaining habitat, and maintenance or creation of brush corridors connecting these habitats, is necessary for survival of the Ocelot population in Texas. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, The Nature Conservancy, and many local landowners have been working to protect, acquire and restore Ocelot

habitat in the Rio Grande Valley. Restoration generally involves revegetating previously cleared areas with native trees and shrubs.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Texas Department of Transportation are also working together to try and reduce Ocelot road mortality by installing Ocelot underpasses under roads where Ocelots are known to frequently cross.

Where To Learn More About Ocelots

The best places to visit to learn more about the Ocelot are the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge near Rio Hondo (956) 748-3607, Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge near Alamo (956) 787-3079, Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park near Mission (956) 585-1107, Las Palomas Wildlife Management Area near Edinburg (956) 447-2704, and Audubon's Sabal Palm Grove Sanctuary near Brownsville (956) 541-8034.

How You Can Help

You can be involved with the conservation of Texas' nongame wildlife resources by supporting the Special Nongame and Endangered Species Conservation Fund. Special nongame stamps and decals are available at Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) field offices, most state parks, and the License Branch of TPWD headquarters in Austin. The Feline Research Program at the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute (Texas A&M University-Kingsville) also accepts contributions to its Cat Conservation Fund. These funds are dedicated to the research and recovery of free-ranging wild cats of Texas. For more information, contact the Feline Research Program at (361) 593-3922.

The non-profit group, Friends of Laguna Atascosa Refuge, has an Adopt-an-Ocelot program in which 100% of the donated funds go towards ocelot conservation. For a small donation, participants receive an adoption packet that includes life histories and pictures of ocelots living at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, ocelot facts, and an adoption certificate. To learn more, contact Linda Laack at (956) 748-3607 or write Adopt-an-Ocelot, P.O. Box 942, Rio Hondo, Texas 78583.

The public is asked to report sightings of Ocelots to the Feline



Sub-tropical forest habitat
© TPWD



Habitat loss in the Lower Rio Grande Valley
© TPWD Bill Reeves

Research Program, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, or U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Be sure to note tail length, size, color, habitat, behavior, location, date, and time of day seen.

For More Information Contact

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department
Wildlife Diversity Branch
4200 Smith School Road
Austin, Texas 78744

(512) 912-7011 or (800) 792-1112

or

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife
Refuge

P.O. Box 450

Rio Hondo, Texas 78583

(956) 748-3607

or

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Ecological Services - LRGV Office

Route 2, Box 202-A

Alamo, Texas 78516

(956) 784-7560

Management guidelines are available from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department or U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for landowners and managers wishing to conserve and improve habitat for the Ocelot.

References

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- Tewes, M.E. and D.J. Schmidly. 1987. "The neotropical felids: jaguar, ocelot, margay, and jaguarundi" in M. Novak, J. Baker, M.E. Obbard and B. Malloch (eds.) *Wild Furbearer Management and Conservation in North America*. Ministry of Natural Resources, Ontario. 697-711.
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1990. *Listed cats of Texas and Arizona recovery plan (with emphasis on the ocelot)*. Endangered Species Office, Albuquerque, N.M.
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