

# Community Helps Save Laguna Atascosa's Wildlife

by Linda Laack



**A pair of aplomado falcons comes to rest on a yucca at Laguna Atascosa NWR while ocelot kittens await their mother. Both species are among the diverse array at wildlife breeding at the refuge.**

Top photo by Tim Cooper, bottom photo by Linda Laack

While piping plovers (*Charadrius melodus*) search for flies along the shore of the Laguna Madre on the south Texas coast, a pair of aplomado falcons (*Falco femoralis*) rests atop a nearby yucca and scan the grasslands for prey. A quarter-mile away lies a recumbent ocelot (*Leopardus pardalis*) hidden beneath a dense canopy of thorny brush, relaxing after an active night of hunting. Despite such disparate lifestyles and habitat needs, these endangered species all reside at the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. The 65,000-acre (26,000-hectare) refuge is not only home to nine endangered or threatened species, it is also an important wintering waterfowl area, a Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network site, and—at 410 species—boasts a greater variety of bird life than any occurs on other National Wildlife Refuge.

The diversity of wildlife at Laguna Atascosa is related to its unique network of habitats: intertwining coastal prairies and Tamaulipan thornscrub interspersed with brackish and freshwater wetlands. These habitats stretch along a pristine shoreline adjoining the Laguna Madre, a hypersaline lagoon between the refuge and South Padre Island. Each of these habitat types has its own association of species.

The aplomado falcon prefers the coastal prairie. Once a common component of the grasslands of the southwestern United States, it declined dramatically during the early 1900s and was extirpated in the United States by the 1950s. The Fish and Wildlife Service listed it as endangered in 1986. The Peregrine Fund, Inc. (PF), a nonprofit organization dedicated to conserving birds of prey, has taken the lead in recovering this species. The PF has a

captive breeding population of aplomado falcons at its World Center for Birds of Prey in Boise, Idaho. The captive birds provide a source of chicks for reintroduction into the wild. The PF has released 812 young falcons into South Texas since 1985. Many of these released birds are now nesting and rearing young in the wild. In 2002, 27 nests were located in south Texas.

Laguna Atascosa has provided financial and logistical support, vehicle and equipment use, and housing for PF field staff since the inception of the reintroduction efforts. The PF initially focused its efforts at the refuge, but it quickly ran into a “good” problem. The release sites at Laguna Atascosa were becoming occupied by breeding pairs, requiring the PF to look for additional release sites elsewhere. Since most aplomado falcon habitat in Texas is privately owned, it was important to partner with landowners. In 1997, the PF and the Service developed a plan for the reintroduction of aplomado falcons known as a Safe Harbor Agreement for private landowners. This agreement provides protection for landowners from potential land-use restrictions imposed by the Endangered Species Act and has allowed access to more than one million acres (404,000 ha) of privately owned habitat for reintroduction efforts. In addition to private lands, the PF started releasing aplomado falcons at nearby Matagorda Island and Aransas NWRs, and they are now nesting on these refuges, too.

In contrast to the open spaces that appeal to aplomado falcons, ocelots are denizens of the concealing tangle of vegetation found in thornscrub communities. Laguna Atascosa is one of the last

strongholds for these rare felines in the United States. We estimate that fewer than 100 ocelots remain in the U.S., all in south Texas. About 30 to 40 live in and around the refuge. The same year the ocelot was listed as endangered (1982), the first radio-telemetry ocelot study in Texas was initiated to learn about their natural history and habitat requirements. For 20 years, Laguna Atascosa staff, volunteers, and visiting researchers have monitored the Laguna Atascosa population by tracking the movements of 5 to 10 radio-collared ocelots annually.

As with many species, the main cause for the decline of the ocelot in south Texas has been habitat loss and fragmentation. Conversion to farmland took a heavy toll, particularly during the mid-1900s. Today, however, urban sprawl is a greater threat. Programs have been started to protect habitat on private lands near the refuge. In 1992, the Service signed a cooperative agreement with an irrigation district near the refuge whereby the district agreed to clean their irrigation ditches from only one side, leaving the other side of the ditches vegetated so ocelots could freely travel along them. In addition, the Service has acquired easements on more than 2,500 (1,010 ha) acres of private land near the refuge, allowing landowners to continue their normal ranching practices but ensuring that ocelot habitat will be secure in the future. Laguna Atascosa also participates in a collaborative effort between landowners, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, and several nonprofit groups to restore small but critical tracts of ocelot habitat near the refuge on previously cleared areas.

The Service also works with the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) to reduce ocelot road mortality. Being struck by vehicles is the leading cause of death for ocelots in Texas. The Service and the TxDOT are trying to reduce this danger by constructing underpasses in key ocelot crossings. Several underpasses have already been installed and more are planned for the future.

The nonprofit organization, Friends of Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, is also involved in ocelot conservation. Its volunteers started an “adopt-an-ocelot” program to raise funds for these cats. For a small donation, people receive an information packet and can “adopt” one of the radio-collared ocelots. The Friends group also sponsors an annual ocelot festival which involves the local community in ocelot conservation. About \$30,000 has been raised for ocelots with these two activities. Friends of Laguna Atascosa enhances this money by partnering with other groups, matching funds for the purchase and restoration of habitat.

Every endangered species program needs to involve landowners and local communities. After years of effort, the aplomado falcon, the ocelot, and many other species at Laguna Atascosa are benefitting from these activities. Though often a struggle, these programs have proven to be some of the most rewarding and beneficial aspects of endangered species work in south Texas.

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**Linda Laack with a collared ocelot.**  
*Photos by Tim Cooper*

