



The Ocelot

Leopardus pardalis

Introduction

Elusive, solitary, wary, and endangered, the ocelot is rarely seen. Its range includes Texas, Arizona, Mexico, Central America, and South America. In the United States, fewer than 100 ocelots exist—in south Texas at Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge and Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge, both near Alamo; Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge near Brownsville; and on a private ranch several miles away. The species has also been known to occur in Arizona. Listed in 1982 as endangered, the ocelot is protected by the Endangered Species Act. The ocelot is also listed on Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Commercial trade of CITES Appendix I species is strictly prohibited.

Description

Weighing as much as 35 pounds, the ocelot has a graceful body that may be up to four feet long, including the tail. Varying in color from pale to dark tawny hues, the ocelot's coat has brown spots with black borders that are elongated, like chain links, and follow downward sweeping lines.



Ocelot range map.
courtesy of NatureServe

A black line above each eye extends to the back of the head. Many people regard the ocelot as the most beautiful of the American cats. Each animal's coat is distinctive and unique; no two animals are alike.

Habitat and Prey

The ocelot seems to prefer dense cover but can use a variety of habitats, hunting in the brushy forests and semi-arid deserts in the northern part of its range as well as the tropical forests, mountain slopes, and pampas located throughout its southern range.

Prey species for the cat are diverse and numerous. Hunting mostly at night, the ocelot eats rabbits, birds, fish, agoutis (small rodents in Central America and South America), other rodent species including mice, snakes, and other small to medium-sized prey such as lizards.

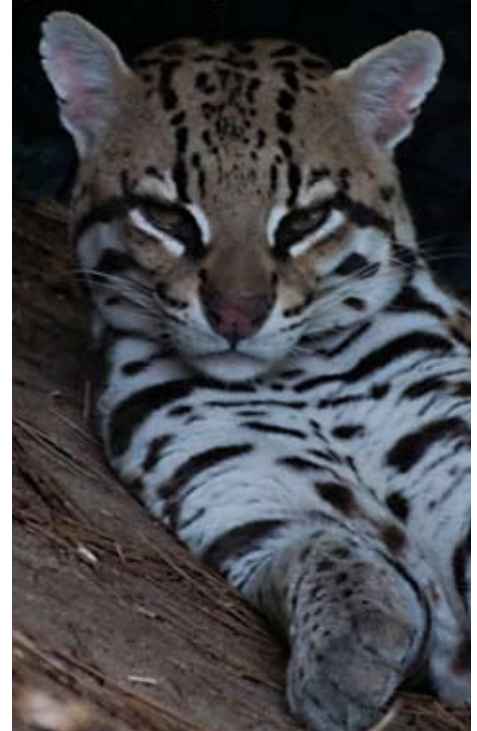
Typical Behavior and Raising Young

Ocelots sleep during daylight hours, either draped along a high tree limb or in a sheltered den, which may be a hollow tree, small cave, or a shallow depression under vegetation. The ocelot climbs, jumps, and swims well. According to *Walker's Mammals of the World*, a study in Peru found that male ocelot ranges were larger than those of the females. The animals move around alone but make contact frequently and probably maintain a network of social ties. They communicate by mewling and "during courtship, by yowls."

The gestation period is 70 days. One to four kittens may be born, usually in the fall. Like other members of the cat family, the kittens are born blind and remain so for a week or more. Kittens begin hunting with their mother when they are about three months old and remain with her for a year.

Cause of Decline and Strategy for Recovery

Initially, habitat loss and hunting pushed the species to the brink of extinction. Now, continuing habitat loss, collisions with vehicles, and inbreeding resulting from small and isolated groups are keeping the species' population numbers low. The recovery plan for the species includes connecting



Ocelot resting against tree.
Photo courtesy of Carole Robertson, St. Mark's National Wildlife Refuge Photo Club

the populations in Texas and Mexico to provide a migratory corridor and expand the gene pool.

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January 2010