

JAGUAR

Named “yaguara” by South American Indians, the jaguar is the largest cat in the Americas and the top predator in the Western Hemisphere—after humans.

The Real King of the Jungle

Jaguars (*Panthera onca*) are secretive, solitary, largely nocturnal predators that hunt by stealth, using dense undergrowth for cover. The largest cats in the Western Hemisphere, they can reach lengths of eight feet and weigh up to 200 pounds. Unlike cougars, jaguars are very stocky, broad-chested and muscular. They are the only “roaring” cat native to North America. They have powerful jaws that allow them to kill with one bite, piercing the skull of their prey or cracking open well-armored reptiles such as land tortoises and river turtles. Throughout their range, jaguars feed on some 85 prey species, including coatimundis, armadillos, tapirs, peccaries, fish, turtle eggs, birds, crocodilians, lizards, and monkeys.

Because they are solitary and require a significant amount of food, jaguars range over large areas in search of prey. They are opportunistic hunters that inhabit a variety of ecoregions. Jaguars can be found from the wooded canyons of the Sonoran desert to the rain forests of South and Central America to the flooded grassland ecosystem of the Brazilian Pantanal and the thickets of the dry Bolivian Chaco region.

Beyond the Jungle

Jaguars have long been an integral part of what are now Latin American ecosystems. The Tucano Indians of the Amazon believed the roar of the jaguar was the sound of thunder. The Olmecs, the earliest-known Mexican civilization, believed in a mythic man-jaguar transformation (translated as “were-jaguar”). But these cats are also native to North America, and their range probably extended into the southwestern United States as recently



as the early 1900s. Much more than just jungle cats, jaguars have been documented in Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and Louisiana.

The jaguar’s decline in the United States was probably largely driven by increasing human activities in the Southwest, including landscape conversion for large-scale cattle ranches, destruction of riparian areas, predator-control programs, and perhaps declining prey populations due to overhunting. Today, scientists believe that the northernmost populations of breeding jaguars are in Mexico. As recently as 1987, jaguars were considered common in areas of Sonora and Tamaulipas, Mexico, approximately 150 to 200 miles from the United States border.

Recently, individual jaguar sightings in the United States—unconfirmed sightings have been reported throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and two cats were photographed in Arizona in 1996—have raised questions about what needs to be done to

conserve jaguars on both sides of the border. Most scientists believe that jaguars are now only transient in the United States and that the reported cats were merely dispersing males from Mexico, a natural occurrence at the fringe of this wide-ranging cat's habitat. But recent jaguar presence indicates that areas of the southwestern United States can still support jaguars. As a result, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service issued a rule in 1997 to extend the jaguar's endangered status under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) to include its range in the United States in addition to Latin America.

Jaguars at Risk

Over the past century, jaguars have been extirpated or lost from approximately half of their historic range. The most immediate threat to jaguars historically was the international fur trade. In the late 1960s, for example, as many as 15,000 jaguars may have been shot each year in the Brazilian Amazon alone. Today, protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora (CITES) and the U.S. Endangered Species Act, the trade in jaguar parts has declined significantly. But despite national and international protections, jaguars are still killed indiscriminately in almost one-third of their current range.

Habitat loss is now thought to be the main threat to jaguars, as logging practices, forest clearing for small farms, and urban development fragment and destroy habitat. In some areas, subsistence farmers in the jaguar's range supplement their diets with jaguar prey species, such as peccaries, tapirs, and deer. Logging roads also encroach on jaguar habitat, which allow poachers access to pristine habitat. These roads can facilitate illegal killing of jaguars or overexploitation of prey species that the cats depend upon. Some scientists estimate that, due to overhunting of prey species, jaguars now lack an adequate prey base in 27 percent of their range.

Public perception of jaguars also threatens their survival. Throughout much of their range, jaguars are known to prey on livestock, which leads people to fear the presence of jaguars. In some areas of Mexico, for example, jaguars are often shot indiscriminately. In truth, jaguars and livestock can coexist with negligible impacts on livestock. Efforts such as improving livestock management practices to reduce depredation by jaguars and conserving habitat to support jaguar prey species are critical to conserving jaguars throughout much of their range.

A Future for Jaguars

Jaguar conservation in North America now hinges upon preserving adequate habitat for these cats, protecting migration corridors that permit them to disperse, and improving people's understanding of jaguars and their conservation needs. Human activities in both the United States and Mexico affect the jaguar's survival as resource extraction, agriculture, and development lead to habitat loss and degradation and the destruction of travel corridors, including linkages that allow jaguars to move northward into the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Efforts to study jaguar distribution and conservation needs throughout the species' range and to conserve jaguar habitat in the southwestern United States will be critical to protecting these cats in North America.

Ultimately, human actions will determine the fate of this beautiful wild cat, as well as the fates of a multitude of other species that share the ecosystems jaguars inhabit. As top-level predators, jaguars play an important role in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands ecosystem and are important to the ecological health of the region. The jaguar may now be just an occasional visitor to the southwestern United States, but the borderlands region is still an integral part of this cat's range. Over the long term, successful efforts to conserve jaguars in North America will require efforts on both sides of the border to protect existing jaguar populations and conserve large wilderness lands to support both resident and dispersing cats.