

OCELOT

Hunted in the past by the Aztecs for its beautiful fur, the ocelot today faces an uncertain future, due to degradation of its habitat, illegal hunting, and the continuing fur trade.

A Rare Cat

The ocelot (*Leopardus pardalis*) is a medium-sized cat, measuring up to three feet in body length and weighing twice as much as a large domestic cat. Its slender body is covered with attractive, irregular-shaped rosettes and spots that run the length of its body, giving it a distinctive appearance that has long attracted the attention of fur traders and illegal pet merchants. Ocelots usually hunt at night and under cover, but they do venture into open spaces on moonless nights. The ocelot preys on small deer, rabbits, rodents, reptiles, and birds, varying its hunting behavior to coincide with seasonal abundances of particular prey.

The ocelot is found in every country south of the U.S.-Mexico border except Chile, as well as in the southwestern United States. Its versatility is reflected in the diverse array of ecosystems that the ocelot inhabits throughout its range: from the heavy rainforests of Mexico to the dry, thorny forests of Venezuela to the mountainous areas of Columbia, Ecuador, and northern Peru. The common habitat component throughout its range is dense cover near the ground, which grants this secretive cat protection as it hunts and travels.

Although the ocelot may still be fairly numerous throughout parts of its range, its continued existence is threatened in certain areas by the pressures of hunting, habitat loss and fragmentation, and exploitation for the fur and pet trades. Ocelot populations have been extirpated from their northernmost range in Arkansas, Louisiana, eastern Texas, and possibly Arizona. Ocelot numbers in south Texas are dwindling due to habitat destruction and

Photo courtesy of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service



mortality from vehicles. In Mexico, ocelots are more numerous, but they still face the threat of extirpation as their habitat is increasingly destroyed.

Threats to the Ocelot

As far back as the ancient Aztec civilization, the ocelot was hunted and prized for its pelt. Modern fashion has also valued the ocelot: From the early 1960s to the mid 1970s, an estimated 200,000 ocelots were taken every year for the fur trade—more than any other spotted cat species in the world. By the 1980s, the survival of this small, spotted feline was at risk.

In 1982, the ocelot was designated an endangered species under the Endangered Species Act, a status which extends U.S. protections to the species throughout its range, including Mexico, South America, and Central America. Ocelot populations gained greater protections in 1989, when the



species was upgraded to Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Flora and Fauna (CITES)—a strong protection which prohibits CITES signatories from permitting any trade in the species or its parts.

Throughout Latin America, however, the ocelot is still exposed to excessive mortality due to the illegal fur trade. Hunting is regulated in Peru, while in Ecuador, El Salvador, and Guyana, there are no protections in place for the species. In addition, poaching for the pet trade is still a concern in Latin American countries, and the destruction of large tracts of ocelot habitat for the production of charcoal in Mexico has recently become a particular concern, as increasing numbers of rural people depend upon this growing industry.

In North America, the greatest threat to the ocelot today is the destruction and fragmentation of habitat. Ocelots rely upon the thick vegetation along the Lower Rio Grande River for foraging, resting, and establishing dens. Ocelots also require corridors, such as rivers, shorelines, and natural drainages, to travel between core habitat areas. But in south Texas, the dense brush and oak-forest mosaics and chaparral (mesquite) habitat ocelots require is often cleared for agriculture, urban sprawl, and other human purposes. Destruction and fragmentation of core habitat and corridors increases threats to the ocelot such as incidental trapping, competition from feral dogs and cats, and mortality from vehicles. Scientists now estimate the total U.S. ocelot population at roughly 80 individuals, and very little of the south Texas area supports optimal ocelot habitat, making the security of the U.S. ocelot population uncertain. In Mexico, particularly in the northeast, ocelots also suffer from habitat loss as areas are destroyed primarily for charcoal production, and subsequently as land is converted for agriculture and ranches.

Three national wildlife refuges support good ocelot habitat in Texas—Laguna Atascosa, Santa Ana, and Lower Rio Grande Valley—but much of the land surrounding these areas is privately owned and therefore not directly managed for ocelot needs. Road construction and land conversion are growing

concerns for the ocelots that inhabit the refuges as well, since these cats are at a high risk of being hit by cars at night. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which manages the refuges, has made efforts to work with federal and state highway agencies to deter the threat of road kill—currently the single greatest cause of ocelot mortality in the U.S. Unfortunately, many of the culverts constructed to help ocelots pass under roads are poorly built or not placed at frequently used ocelot crossings and have therefore been ineffective.

Outlook for the Ocelot

As human activities continue to encroach on ocelot habitat, impacts upon the species will likely increase. Scientists and wildlife managers must work with local private landowners and governments to ensure that the ocelot's survival is not jeopardized by conversion of brush communities to agriculture or by the construction of new roads. Reforestation projects in south Texas and plans to reconvert 60 percent of farm fields to brush communities within Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge may recreate important habitat areas for ocelots in Texas. The wildlife refuges are also working to acquire land in order to form a wildlife corridor to allow the isolated ocelot populations to breed and disperse into new suitable habitat.

Efforts to reduce road kill by monitoring road construction and designing more effective culverts under existing roads will be critical to helping this species recover in Texas. A proposed joint U.S.-Mexico program to study the dynamics of ocelot populations on the border also promises to lend new insights into protecting this species at the northern end of its range. In the end, the continued existence of the ocelot in its northernmost range in the United States is dependent on research, effective monitoring, and the responsible management of the biological travel corridors that connect core ocelot habitats. Protecting core areas and corridors, two key components of the ocelot's environment, must be integrated into management decisions if the ocelot is to survive in the southwestern United States.