

# Natural History of Ocelots



## Ocelots in Arizona

The ocelot is listed as Endangered throughout its range by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The Arizona Game and Fish Department classifies ocelots as Endangered and a species of special concern.<sup>i</sup> Ocelots were nearly extinguished in the U.S. because their furs are so lucrative to trappers. Researchers believe fewer than 100 ocelots currently exist in the U.S.

Ocelots were once thought to no longer reside in Arizona. However, a handful of ocelots have recently been documented in southeastern Arizona. At least five ocelots have been photographed since 2009 in the Huachuca Mountains, Santa Rita Mountains and Cochise County, Arizona.<sup>ii</sup> This includes the occurrence of a mature male, who was treed on a local ranch in the Huachuca Mountains in February, 2011. State game officials arrived and took photographic evidence of the ocelot before allowing the cat to leave on his own.<sup>iii</sup>

## Physical characteristics

Ocelots are medium-sized, slim cats with body dimensions similar to a bobcat. Their tail is about one-half the length of their head and body, and females are slightly smaller than males. The smallest adult female ocelots are about the weight of a large domestic cat.<sup>iv</sup> Males range from 37.4 to 53.82 inches in length and females range from 36.22 to 47.60 inches. Weight for males ranges from 15.43 to 31.96 pounds and females range

from 15.43 to 23.81 pounds.<sup>v</sup> Their lifespan in the wild is unknown but up to 20 years in captivity.<sup>vi</sup>

Ocelots have a robust build with thickset limbs, a blocky muzzle and rounded ears that are black with a white central spot on the back. Their forepaws are much larger than their hindpaws.

Ocelots have soft, dense fur with base colors ranging from gray or creamy-buff to cinnamon-brown. Dark markings form chain-like streaks that resemble elongated spots or nearly stripes running obliquely down the sides. The head has small black spots and two black stripes on each cheek, and four to five parallel black stripes on the neck. The backs of the rounded ears are black with a white central spot. The underbelly is lighter in color. Ocelots have large eyes that are golden in color.<sup>vii</sup>

## Habitat & range

Ocelots can be found in a wide variety of habitats but strongly prefer areas with dense vegetative cover and high prey populations.<sup>viii</sup> They occur in dense thorn-scrub, shrub woodland, wooded savannah grasslands, mangroves, swamp-woodland mosaics, and a variety of dry and moist forests. They can also occur in agricultural land if dense brush is present. There is currently little research on ocelot habitat use in Arizona and Sonora.

Ocelots tend to avoid open areas but will hunt in pasture and grasslands if they are

close to cover, especially at night. They are generally found between sea level and 4,000 feet.<sup>ix</sup>

**Home range:** An ocelot's home range is a fixed area that includes necessary resources for life, such as hunting opportunities, water resources and denning sites where mothers can rear their kittens.<sup>x</sup>

Both male and female ocelots establish home ranges with considerable overlap. Male ocelots generally occupy larger home ranges than females – typically two to four times the size – and overlap with multiple female ranges.<sup>xi</sup>

The average range size for a female ocelot is 1.3 km<sup>2</sup> to 75 km<sup>2</sup> (approx. 0.5 to 29 sq. miles) while the average range for a male ocelot is 5.2 km<sup>2</sup> to 90.5 km<sup>2</sup> (approx. 2 to 35 sq. miles) depending on habitat type and prey abundance.<sup>xii</sup>

Density estimates for ocelots vary, including 2.3-3.8 per 100km<sup>2</sup> (tropical pine forest, Belize), 13-19 per 100km<sup>2</sup> (Atlantic Forest, Brazil), 26 per 100km<sup>2</sup> (tropical rainforest, Belize) and 52 per 100km<sup>2</sup> (Chaco-Chiquitano forest, Bolivia).<sup>xiii</sup>

**Geographic range:** Ocelots are widely distributed throughout the Americas, ranging from southern Texas and southern Arizona, through Central and South America into northern Argentina and Uruguay (Fig. 1).<sup>xiv</sup> They occupy a very limited region in both the United States (remnant populations in southern

Texas and southeastern Arizona) and Argentina.<sup>xv</sup> Historically, ocelots ranged from Arkansas to Arizona, south to Paraguay, Uruguay, and northern Argentina. This included eastern, central, and southern Texas, and possibly Louisiana. Fossils of ocelots have been reported from the U.S., primarily in California, Arizona, and Florida.<sup>xvi</sup>

Figure 1: Current ocelot range



## Prey types & hunting methods

Ocelots are opportunistic hunters and their diet changes with the season and prey availability, consisting of a wide variety of small vertebrates and large invertebrates.<sup>xvii</sup> Their powerful build allows them to take down large prey,

including sloths, javelinas and juvenile white-tailed deer.<sup>xviii</sup> However, their typical prey is small mammals such as rodents, opossums, armadillos, squirrels, rabbits, and small monkeys.<sup>xix</sup>

Ocelots will also hunt reptiles and birds. They frequently hunt aquatic and semi-aquatic species including fish, amphibians and crustaceans. Ocelots will sometimes kill poultry but generally do not prey on domestic animals.<sup>xx</sup> They will also scavenge for food and frequently “cache,” or hide, their meals by covering them with leaf and soil debris.<sup>xxi</sup>

Ocelots are generally nocturnal and hunt after dark, though it is not uncommon to see them during the day. Though normally solitary, they frequently travel and hunt in pairs, probably as mates, maintaining contact and signaling each other with cries like those of domestic cats. Ocelots are good climbers and swimmers, often hunting along streams.<sup>xxii</sup>

## Rearing of young

The ocelot has a very low reproductive rate, producing only approximately five kittens in their lifetime. This is the result of a long gestation period (79 to 82 days), small litter size (one to two kittens) and long periods between litters as kittens reach independence between 17 and 22 months of age.<sup>xxiii</sup>

The minimum breeding age for female ocelots varies from 10 months in captive ocelots, to 18 months in captive and wild ocelots. Ocelot reproduction is thought

to be aseasonal, with newborn kittens detected every month of the year.<sup>xxiv</sup> Female ocelots usually choose a bare area in a dense thicket to raise their kittens, though dens in caves, logs, and hollow trees have been reported.<sup>xxv</sup> They remain dependent on their mother for meals for several months. Kittens remain on the mother’s home range for the first years. At this time, young males disperse, probably forced out by the resident adult male. Females may settle on a portion of the mother’s home range or on a neighboring site.<sup>xxvi</sup> Dispersal distances range from approximately 1.5 to 19 miles.<sup>xxvii</sup>

## Threats to survival

Habitat destruction and illegal hunting are the main drivers of declines in ocelot populations outside of the U.S. Because of their mild manner, ocelots are easily trapped or shot, and therefore are the most frequently hunted cats in Latin America.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Before international trade of ocelots became illegal in 1989, they were largely trapped and hunted for their furs, with 140,000 to 200,000 skins exported each year from Latin America during the 1960’s and 70’s.<sup>xxix</sup> Illegal hunting for ocelot furs is still widespread. Additionally, accidental killing, such as from vehicle collisions and predation from other wildlife and domestic dogs are also threats to ocelot survival.<sup>xxx</sup> Vehicle collisions are the number one cause of ocelot deaths in the U.S.<sup>xxxi</sup>

<sup>i</sup> U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2010. Draft Ocelot (*Leopardus pardalis*) Recovery Plan, First Revision. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Southwest Region, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

<sup>ii</sup> Hunter, L. 2015. Wild Cats of the World. Ocelot. Bloomsbury USA, pp.104-111; Robbins, E. 2014. Last Stand for U.S. Ocelots? National Geographic. Retrieved from <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/06/140603-ocelots-cats-wildlife-recovery-habitat-loss-panther-highway/>

<sup>iii</sup> Arizona Game and Fish Department. 2010. Arizona Game and Fish Department, Heritage Data Management System. Animal Abstract: *Leopardus pardalis*. Retrieved from <https://www.azgfd.com/Portallimages/files/ocelot.pdf>.

<sup>iv</sup> Hunter, L. 2015.

<sup>v</sup> Arizona Game and Fish Department. 2010.

<sup>vi</sup> Hunter, L. 2015.

<sup>vii</sup> Arizona Game and Fish Department. 2010; Hunter, L. 2015.

<sup>viii</sup> Hunter, L. 2015.

<sup>ix</sup> Arizona Game and Fish Department. 2010.

<sup>x</sup> Hansen, K. 1992. Cougar: The American Lion. Northland Publishing, Flagstaff, AZ

<sup>xi</sup> Hunter, L. 2015.

<sup>xii</sup> Hunter, L., and P. Barrett. 2011.

<sup>xiii</sup> Hunter, L. 2015.

<sup>xiv</sup> U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2010.

<sup>xv</sup> Arizona Game and Fish Department. 2010.

<sup>xvi</sup> U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2010.

<sup>xvii</sup> Arizona Game and Fish Department. 2010.

<sup>xviii</sup> Hunter, L. 2015.

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- <sup>xix</sup> Wilson, D. E., and S. Ruff, (Eds.). 1999. The Smithsonian Book of North American Mammals. Smithsonian Institute Press, in association with the American Society of Mammalogists. Washington and London. P. 228-229.
- <sup>xx</sup> Hunter, L. 2015.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Hunter, L., and P. Barrett. 2011.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Hunter, L. 2015.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Wilson, D. E., and S. Ruff, (Eds.). 1999.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Wilson, D. E., and S. Ruff, (Eds.). 1999.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Hunter, L. 2015.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Arizona Game and Fish Department. 2010.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Hunter, L. 2015.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Hunter, L., and P. Barrett. 2011.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Robbins, E. 2014. Last Stand for U.S. Ocelots? National Geographic. Retrieved from <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/06/140603-ocelots-cats-wildlife-recovery-habitat-loss-panther-highway/>.