



Jaguars

Magnificence in the Southwest

In 1986, a large male jaguar was cornered by hounds and shot in the Dos Cabezas Mountains. Tragically, this was the last jaguar known to live in Arizona. The last female had been shot in 1963, so clearly there had been no breeding taking place. The obituaries were written and wildlife aficionados mourned the loss of another species. This, in an area that begs for wildlife diversity.

Well, something about southern Arizona must appeal to the most magnificent of all the large cats, because there have been recent sightings of jaguars north of the border. Either they're trying to move back into southern Arizona, or they never left.

In 1996, Warner Glenn, a rancher and hunting guide from Douglas, spotted a large cat in the Peloncillo Mountains, east of Douglas. Thinking it was a cougar, he grabbed his camera. After a closer look, he said, "God almighty, that's a jaguar!" Glenn photographed the cat, then allowed it to go on its way. Six months later Tucson hunters Jack Childs and Matt Colvin treed another jaguar near the reservation of the Tohono O'Odham Nation. The one hundred and fifty pound cat was groggy from feeding, and allowed the men to videotape it at length.

Jack Childs became a jaguar researcher and traveled to Brazil's Pantanal wilderness to study the cats. In 1999, he began placing remote cameras in southern Arizona. In 2001 he saw his first jaguar photograph. The cat, which appeared healthy, well fed and heavily built, weighed in between 130 and 150 pounds. Childs named it Macho A. The cat appeared on film again in August 2003, and in September 2004. Since then, Childs has seen a second male, Macho B, and possibly a third.

Alan Rabinowitz, director of the Wildlife Conservation Society's Science and Exploration Program, believes the cats might be dispersing from a population known to exist in Sonora, Mexico, about one hundred and thirty miles south of Douglas. He believes the population in Sonora might be in serious trouble, and likens their wandering to a desperate attempt to survive in any way possible.

Other opinions differ, however, claiming that the yellow and worn teeth on Macho B indicate it is four to six years old. This is past the age when it would leave its home turf and search for a new habitat. If this is true, the cats that have been seen and photographed are permanent residents, rather than transients. There is also the hopeful prospect that the third cat in the photos is a female and breeding is taking place.

Jaguars, with a 1.5 million year history, were once an abundant part of American fauna. At one time they ranged as far north in this country as Washington State and were seen in California as late as the mid 50s. The last one hundred years have been especially hard on them. The technology and human population boom of the post World War II years, has obliterated more than half their habitat in the western hemisphere. Central America lost 65 percent of its forest cover and Brazil 58 percent. Demand for their pelts, and game hunting also played a major part in the reduction of their overall numbers. In 1969, 10,000 skins, valued at \$1.5 million dollars were imported into the U.S. Livestock farmers and jaguars have always been at odds, although recent studies indicate the big cats get blamed for more livestock deaths than they cause.

Fortunately, the entire jaguar population is getting help from some dedicated and resourceful advocates who are waging a battle, on several fronts, to assist in stemming the population decline.

In 1999, the Wildlife Conservation Society held a workshop that brought together more than two dozen experts from throughout the jaguar's range. The workshop spawned the WCS Jaguar Conservation Program. Using Global Information System technology, they developed maps of existing jaguar habitat. They also determined where good jaguar populations existed, and assessed the most significant threats to jaguars. They then devised a strategy to mitigate those threats and protect important populations through the cat's range. The group then set up Jaguar Conservation Units, which are areas of intact, though unprotected, jaguar habitat. In the next few years they carried out exploratory surveys, population estimates, and ecological research in Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, Venezuela and Brazil.

The program also launched experimental projects with ranchers to resolve jaguar-livestock problems in the Brazilian Pantanal, the Venezuelan Llanos, the Belize rain forest and Mexico's Sonoran Desert. A jaguar education curriculum was developed in Spanish, and a grant program funded young nationals who wanted to help conserve their country's jaguars.

As the people in the program collected more data, they made an amazing discovery—Jaguars are travelers, and journeys of 500 miles are not unusual. In 1993 reports surfaced of jaguars swimming across the Panama Canal. Tracks on Barro Colorado Island confirmed the reports. Then came Glenn's sighting in southern Arizona. This led to the discovery of the small population of jaguars in northern Sonora, Mexico. By now the wildlife experts are wondering— where are the nomadic cats going to turn up next?

The WCS Jaguar Conservation Program was renamed Paseo Tigre—The Path of the Jaguar. The program was also refocused to include study of the jaguar's routes between their populations, as well as established habitats.

The Center of Biological Diversity and Defenders of Wildlife are taking legal approach to the jaguar's protection. They filed suit in federal court to ensure the return of North America's largest cat. The litigation, targeting Interior Secretary Gale Norton, and the Fish and Game Wildlife Service, seeks to jumpstart conservation actions through the timely creation of a recovery plan, six years after the jaguar was listed as an endangered species in the United States. In a recent settlement, the government agreed to decide by July, 3, 2006, on critical habitat areas considered important to a species recovery.

This is all encouraging news for the overall jaguar population. Unfortunately, from a local viewpoint, there's a large dose of vinegar with all the honey. One plan under consideration in an effort to fight the illegal immigration problem is to build an impenetrable fence along the international border. The jaguars, of course, don't know where the border lies. But, if that fence is built, they'll soon find out; their range will be severely restricted, and we might be slamming the door on them. In the interim the increase in human, vehicular and airborne traffic around the border will certainly have an adverse effect on the cat's return to Arizona.

Then again, there's a chance that I'm not giving these incredible creatures enough credit. We gave up on them once—but nobody told the cats that they're not supposed to be here!