



ANIMALS

Ocelots once roamed the U.S. Can we bring them back?

Ocelots are a quintessentially American cat—yet a single tropical storm could wipe them off the U.S. map. Will a pioneering new partnership make a difference?

A male ocelot named Javier peers outside a research trap set by biologist Aidan Branney in March 2023. Branney has set 30 traps in the 27,000-acre El Sauz Ranch in South Texas. There are fewer than a hundred ocelots in the United States, split between private ranchlands and the Laguna Atascosa Wildl...

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Photographs by Karine Aigner

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Only a few centuries years ago, the northern ocelot was a quintessential American cat, prowling places as diverse as Louisiana, Arkansas, and Arizona.

But decades of widespread hunting and habitat loss have winnowed their numbers in the United States to fewer than a hundred individuals, which now roam the thorny scrublands of South Texas. They're split into two populations, one that lives on private ranchlands, and the other in Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, located farther south in the rapidly developing Rio Grande Valley along the Gulf Coast. Though ocelots are plentiful in parts of Central and South America, the northern subspecies is listed as federally endangered in the U.S.



Wildlife biologist Landon Schofield, left, and veterinarian Ashley Reeves, right, both of the East Foundation, and Bill Swanson, center, director of animal research at the Cincinnati Zoo, explore the East Foundation's San Antonio Viejo Ranch property. If their efforts to grow a captive, genetically diverse ocelot po...

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These 25-pound felines, known for their fetching dappled coats, face several challenges. The two American populations are prevented from intermixing due to human development, making them vulnerable to inbreeding, which can ultimately harm their ability to reproduce. Vehicle strikes are the animals' leading cause of death, particularly of young males who set out to find new territory, and the total U.S. population is so small that a single tropical storm could wipe the coastal-dwelling cat off the map.

To protect the species, in 2021, several non-governmental organizations, academic institutions, and private landowners launched a major effort to establish a new ocelot population in Texas, which aims to increase the total number to at least 200 animals for a period of 10 years—the benchmark needed to take it off the endangered species list. [\(See pictures of ocelot kittens caught on camera trap at the wildlife refuge.\)](#)



| The team transports ocelot traps to the southern part of El Sauz Ranch. These humane traps, disguised with branches and sand, contain live pigeons kept in a separate compartment and unharmed. When the pigeon's movement attracts the attention of a predator, it walks in and trips the door. The traps are ch...

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Many other species end up in Aidan Branney's traps. Above, a raccoon and a Harris's hawk (right) wait to be released.

"We're optimistic," says [Grant Harris](#), a chief biologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in the southwestern U.S. "It's a very pioneering partnership. This is how it should work—you have all these groups pulling together for a common goal."

One of the partners, the [East Foundation](#), a Texas-based agricultural research organization that promotes land stewardship, has completed the first step of the project: extracting semen from wild Texas ocelots in the hopes of breeding the cat in captivity. By inseminating ocelots already in U.S. zoos with semen taken from these Texas animals, experts could build a pool of genetically diverse animals to strengthen the wild population, says [Ashley Reeves](#), the East Foundation's research veterinarian.

“

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Sonia Nájera, Director, Landscape Initiatives, South Texas, The Nature Conservancy



Ashley Reeves and her team of grad students study an anesthetized female ocelot, one of 12 animals captured during the 2023 trapping season. When the team catches females, they will often conduct an ultrasound to determine if the cat is pregnant, which provides more data about the species' r...

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Eventually, if USFWS approves the plan, the team will reintroduce these cats into private lands unoccupied by ocelots, which are farther from the coast and its threatening storms. The cats provide key ecological benefits by keeping rodent populations in check, which prevents the smaller mammals from spreading out of control and wreaking havoc on native thorn forests.

The project got another boost this summer, when the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute at Texas A&M University-Kingsville awarded the USFWS nearly \$12.2 million to further ocelot conservation. Funded by U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the grant will support genetic research and restoration of thorn scrub forests—prime ocelot habitat—as well as investigate potential impacts of the border wall on animal movements.

A legacy of living with wildlife

The scrublands of South Texas are ideal habitat for the secretive ocelot, says Landon Schofield, a range and wildlife biologist for the East Foundation, which owns and manages 220,000 acres in the region. “They’re virtually camouflaged” amid the thick brush, he says. Even from 10 feet away, “you’d be hard-pressed to see them.”



| Ashley Reeves stains a blood smear taken from an ocelot to examine under the microscope at her lab in Kingsville, Texas. In genetically compromised species, such samples help biologists understand immune system health, as well as monitor for diseases that can't be seen or diagnosed with camera trapping.



In her lab, Ashley Reeves places frozen straws containing ocelot semen into a storage tank of liquid nitrogen. These samples will be stored until they are put into a suitable female.

That's a boon for coexistence between the felines and people: Ocelots prefer to stick to themselves and rarely attack livestock, preying instead on small mammals.

Schofield calls the 27,000-acre El Sauz Ranch near the Mexico border a “living laboratory,” where camera traps allow the team to actively monitor ocelot movements, habitat use, competition with other predators, and more. For instance, one video revealed never-before-seen ocelot behavior: three generations—a grandmother, mother, and daughter—grooming each other. “It rewrote some of our thinking of how they structure themselves,” Reeves says. (See camera trap video of an ocelot at night.)

Luckily for ocelot conservationists, there's already a legacy of supporting wildlife on the private ranches of South Texas, adds Schofield. These plots are critical, as 95 percent of the state is private land.

“What makes South Texas unique is its large ranches dating back to the Spanish land grants, which have been on the forefront of wildlife conservation,” Schofield says. “There are lots of reasons to keep these lands intact, and wildlife is a large component of that.”



Visitors to the Gladys Porter Zoo in Brownsville, Texas, caress an ocelot skin confiscated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in March 2023. The pelt was displayed next to three other cat species once native to Texas—the margay, jaguarundi, and jaguar—as part of the zoo's annual Ocelot Conservation Day celebration.



Runners warm up before a 5K race during Ocelot Conservation Day. The event includes scavenger hunts, games, ocelot face painting tables, crafts, and the opportunity to see a live ocelot.

Sonia Nájera, director of landscape initiatives for the [Nature Conservancy's Texas chapter](#), agrees: “If it hadn’t been for the large ranches staying in the ranch economy, we wouldn’t have the habitat in South Texas that supports a lot of wildlife we currently have, like the ocelot.”

Yet bringing back the ocelot will require much more than research on private ranches, says [Jim Sanderson](#), program manager for small-cat conservation at the nonprofit [Re:wild](#) and a member of the [Cat Specialist Group at the International Union for Conservation of Nature](#).



Aidan Branney carries an ocelot trap that he'll set up in the southern part of the El Sauz Ranch, which is home to about 30 of the cats. If Branney finds an ocelot in the trap, he messages Reeves and her team, who come in and set up a mobile work station. If the cat is a male, Reeves administers electroejaculation...

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“I appreciate all that they’re doing, and I’m glad it’s being done, but way more needs to be done in the way of action-based threat reduction and conservation, particularly preventing roadkills and preserving land that could provide a corridor between Texas and Mexican populations,” Sanderson says. [A small population of ocelots live across the border in the state of Sonora, Mexico](#), where they’re also listed as endangered, and allowing this group to mix with U.S. ocelots could strengthen their numbers.

Taking action

Additional steps to protect ocelots are already underway, particularly preserving wild areas that could act as stepping stones for the cats to move more freely across the landscape, Nájera says.

For instance, a cat today would have trouble moving south from the Laguna Atascosa wildlife refuge to the Rio Grande delta due to highways and other infrastructure, making green travel corridors crucial for the animal’s future.

“As a land trust, we’ve been really active in partnering with USFWS in getting land protected and set aside for habitat,” Nájera says. In 1999 the Nature Conservancy purchased about a thousand acres of mixed palm and thorn

forest along a bend of the delta, called the Lennox Foundation Southmost Preserve, which is also home to ocelots that use the area as a green corridor.



Ashley Reeves (right), Landon Schofield (background), Aidan Branney, and Georgia Harris (left) examine a male ocelot under sedation.

Defenders of Wildlife, a conservation nonprofit, also works to protect and preserve ocelots and their native thorn forests in the Rio Grande Valley, says Sharon Wilcox, the group's senior Texas representative.

Wilcox is particularly involved in efforts to reduce roadkill. After vehicle strikes killed seven ocelots in 2016 and 2017, conservationists took action. A coalition including USFWS, the Texas Department of Transportation, Houston Zoo, and the Laguna Atascosa refuge funded the construction of 12 underpasses on the highways that saw the most ocelot deaths. Since then, there has been a significant decline in ocelot strikes on Texas roads, says Wilcox, who has worked with the species for 20 years.

Other native species also use the underpasses, and overall, reducing animal strikes leads to fewer road accidents, too. “We’re improving safety for everyone,” she says.

Another tool in reducing roadkill is public awareness campaigns, says Wilcox, who helps manage the annual Ocelot Conservation Day at the Gladys Porter Zoo in Brownsville, Texas. The festival gives visitors—particularly children—a chance to see the zoo’s ocelot.

“When people are made aware of the cats, they’re enthusiastic about their presence,” Wilcox says. “We owe them this fair fight for survival.” (Read: “Out of the shadows, the small wildcats you’ve never seen.”)



| The team releases an ocelot back into its habitat in the El Sauz Ranch. Ocelots generally prey on small rodents, which helps keep the environment healthy.

Schofield adds that though a lack of public knowledge exists about the northern ocelot throughout the U.S., there's recently been "a lot of momentum through films and documentaries to get the word out."

Ultimately conservationists and many ranchers share the aim of preserving the landscape of South Texas and all its denizens, Nájera says.

"The lower Rio Grande Valley is a really beautiful community of nature and people, and as a community, we understand our natural heritage," she says.

"We talk a lot about the ocelot, as we should ... but it's a whole system that we're working to conserve."



■ Northern ocelots, which are most active during the evening, are wary of humans and prefer to live in thorny scrublands where they are rarely seen. The species does not predate on livestock.

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