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A rare moment for one of Texas' last wild ocelots

Researchers documented the kitten's viability by ultrasound.



Ocelots have been listed as federally endangered in the United States since 1982. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

By [Ariana Garcia](#), *Assistant News Editor*
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On a private ranch in [South Texas](#), researchers have confirmed an [endangered ocelot](#) pregnancy by ultrasound —a rare opportunity to document reproduction in one of the last remaining U.S. populations.

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[East Foundation](#) announced in a [Facebook](#) post that one of its recently captured ocelots at El Sauz Ranch is pregnant. The team confirmed the pregnancy and the kitten's viability through an abdominal ultrasound. By their estimates, the female is in the final half to third of her gestation and is expected to give birth within the coming month.

"What you're seeing in the video is a healthy [ocelot kitten](#), just weeks away from entering the world," the foundation wrote.

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A viable ocelot kitten is visible on ultrasound at East Foundation's El Sauz Ranch.
East Foundation

For Dr. Ashley Reeves, East Foundation's research veterinarian, the pregnancy highlights the role private ranchlands play in sustaining the species.

"This ocelot pregnancy is an amazing example of how private cattle ranches in [South Texas](#) provide habitat for the survival and reproduction of [endangered ocelots](#) in [South Texas](#)," Reeves told Chron. "Seeing pregnancies and new kittens being born into the population shows that ocelots are continuing to reproduce in South Texas and maintain their small population here."

[Ocelots in the United States](#) have been listed as federally endangered since 1982. Today, fewer than 100 are believed to remain in the wild, nearly all confined to deep [South Texas](#) after decades of habitat loss,

fragmentation and vehicle strikes drastically reduced their historic range.

Biologists recognize two primary breeding populations: one on private ranchlands in South Texas (often referred to as the Ranch Population) and another centered at [Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge](#) (the Refuge Population). Both populations depend on dense Tamaulipan thornscrub habitat, much of which has been cleared for agriculture and development, leaving the remaining cats isolated in small, disconnected patches.

Ocelots can breed year-round and often give birth to one to two kittens. Reeves said this pregnancy appears to be a typical case of a single-kitten pregnancy. What makes it unique is the ability to document it during a capture.



Researchers safely captured and collared the pregnant ocelot during fieldwork at El Sauz Ranch in South Texas. East Foundation

"As you can imagine with ocelots being endangered, it is [rare to observe](#) a pregnant female anytime throughout the year," she said.

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The confirmed pregnancy comes during East Foundation's current ocelot field research season. The team has successfully captured six ocelots—three females and three males—and collared all six to continue research on private lands. Five of the six had never been captured before, meaning samples were collected from those individuals for the first time. Two other females were found to be lactating, indicating kittens are likely already on the ground at El Sauz.

The pregnant female and the lactating mothers will be closely monitored via their GPS collars to help identify den sites. Wildlife cameras placed across the ranch allow researchers to observe ocelot families without disturbing them.

"All ocelots have a unique fur pattern that tells them apart, so we can individually identify ocelots as we get their pictures over the years," Reeves said. As the kittens are born and grow, researchers will be able to monitor them over their lifetimes through images captured on the ranch's established camera grid.



Researchers confirmed the endangered cat's pregnancy through an abdominal ultrasound at East Foundation's El Sauz Ranch. East Foundation

Researchers are partnering with the [Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute](#) to study ocelot kitten survival rates in [South Texas](#), something that has not been studied locally for several decades.

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"It is very important to know this for understanding the dynamics of ocelot populations and being able to predict how populations could grow and change," Reeves said.

She said challenges for ocelot mothers and kittens can include catching enough prey to provide adequate nutrition and keeping kittens safe from other carnivores in [South Texas](#).

In addition to studying reproduction and survival, researchers are working to better understand the species' diet and movements. By collecting ocelot scat and extracting DNA, scientists can determine diet composition and identify what prey species need to be present in a habitat to support ocelots.



An ultrasound confirms a viable kitten in a pregnant ocelot captured at El Sauz Ranch in South Texas. East Foundation

GPS collars placed on captured cats also help researchers identify movement corridors and understand which areas of habitat are important for connecting ocelots to one another.

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El Sauz Ranch is one of the few places left in the U.S. [where ocelots still reproduce](#) in the wild. Reeves said most remaining ocelots in Texas are found on private lands that have maintained habitat such as Tamaulipan thornscrub and live oak forests, which provide cover and support prey species.

"We are working with Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute right now on efforts to estimate the ocelot population size at the El Sauz ranch," Reeves said. Just this year, researchers have safely captured three females for research. In a camera trapping study about five years ago, nine female ocelots were documented on El Sauz.

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Ariana is the assistant news editor of Chron. Her stories focus on space, wildlife, and any weird happenings in Texas. She previously covered community news and breaking news at the Austin American-Statesman for three years. She earned her B.A. in Journalism from the University of Texas at Austin in 2017. She enjoys watching horror films, nurturing her green thumb, and spoiling her dogs rotten.

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