



Jaguar (*Panthera onca*)



Spanish: Otorongo, Tigre Americano, Tigre Real, Yaguar, Yaguarete

Kingdom Animalia

Phylum Chordata

Class Mammalia

Order Carnivora

Family Felidae

Genus *Panthera* (1)

Size Head-body length: 112 - 241 cm (2)

Shoulder height: 45 - 75 cm (2)

Male weight: 54 – 158 kg (2)

Female weight: 36 – 85 kg (2)

Top facts

- The jaguar is the biggest cat in the Americas
- 'Jaguar' comes from the native Indian name 'yaguara', meaning 'a beast that kills its prey with one bound'
- Black or melanistic forms of the jaguar are relatively common, often called 'black panthers'
- The jaguar is crepuscular, which means it is active at dawn and dusk
- The only big cat to regularly kill by piercing the skull, the jaguar has the most powerful bite of the 'big cats' relative to its size

STATUS

The jaguar is classified as Near Threatened (NT) on the IUCN Red List (1), and listed under Appendix I of CITES (1).

DESCRIPTION

The jaguar (*Panthera onca*) is the largest cat of the Americas and a formidable predator. Its common name comes from the native Indian name 'yaguara', meaning 'a beast that kills its prey with one bound' (3) (4), and its power is clearly displayed by its muscular build, deep chest, large head, broad muzzle, and strong jaws (2). This remarkable cat possesses a visually striking coat of large black rosettes, mostly enclosing dark spots, set against golden brown to yellow fur, which pales to white on the cheeks, throat and underside (2) (5). **Melanistic** forms are also relatively common, often called 'black panthers' in the Americas. Jaguars vary considerably in size in different regions, but genetic studies indicate that there are no subspecies (6). Jaguars found in the dense forested areas of the Amazon Basin are generally smaller and darker in colour than those found in more open terrain (3).

RANGE

Jaguars were once found across the Americas as far north as California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas in the United States (7). In recent years they have been seen and photographed in southern Arizona (6) but otherwise survive only in Central and South America, ranging from Mexico to north

Argentina (2). Their population is small and highly fragmented in Mexico. The highest population densities of up to one per 15 square kilometres are found in the lowland rainforests of the Amazon Basin. Although this refuge is of sufficient size to conserve the species for the foreseeable future, jaguar populations are considered to be declining in most other habitats (4).

HABITAT

The jaguar is found in a variety of habitats across its range, from dense rainforest to seasonally flooded swamp areas, scrubland and savannas, but always near water (2). Primarily occupying lowlands of below 1,000 metres, sightings of jaguars have been reported as high as 3,800 metres (1) (2).

BIOLOGY

Jaguars are solitary animals that occupy shifting territories, males and females only coming together in order to mate (8). Mating occurs throughout the year, but young are reportedly more likely to be born in the wet season when prey is more abundant. The female gives birth to a litter size of one to four cubs after a **gestation** period of 91 to 111 days (9). Young are dependent on their mother for up to two years, after which time they disperse to find their own territory (10). Jaguars reach sexual maturity at two to three years for females, three to four years for males (10). Life span in the wild is not known, but jaguar specialist Alan Rabinowitz estimated that few jaguars in Belize lived more than 11 years. In captivity jaguars have lived as long as 25 years, and one female reached 32 years (11).

Although the jaguar has been characterised as nocturnal, it is more often **crepuscular** (being active around dawn and dusk) (9), with peak activity periods dependent on local prey habits (2). Like most cats, jaguars are opportunistic hunters, and more than 85 species have been recorded in their diet (9), ranging in size from domestic cattle down to various species of peccary, reptiles and fish (3). Relative to their size, they have the most powerful bite of the 'big cats' and are the only big cat to regularly kill by piercing the skull (2).

THREATS

Sadly, human activities have generated the principle threat to the survival of the jaguar (5). Commercial hunting for their pelts was responsible for the death of 18,000 jaguars a year in the 1960s and 1970s. Fortunately, this toll has declined dramatically since the mid-1970s as a result of anti-fur campaigns and CITES controls, which progressively shut down international markets. Due to their predation on domestic livestock, the killing of jaguars by cattle-ranchers is also an ongoing problem (9). One of the primary threats today comes from deforestation, which is having a drastic impact on the jaguar's prey base, as well as fragmenting the cat's population into more isolated pockets, making them more vulnerable to the predations of man (3).

CONSERVATION

Although the jaguar is fully protected over much of its range, hunting is allowed for "problem animals" in Brazil, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Mexico and Peru, trophy hunting is still permitted in Bolivia and there is no legal protection in Ecuador and Guyana. Where protective legislation exists, it is often ignored and un-enforced and even in 'controlled reserves' jaguars are frequently shot (9). If we are to ensure the survival of this magnificent species it is vital that we enforce legislation, obtain the cooperation of local people, and maintain large tracts of contiguous habitat. The Belize government, prompted by the US-based Wildlife Conservation Society, has set aside 150 square kilometres of rain forest in the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Preserve as a protected environment for around 200 jaguars (4) (6). Additionally, the Brazilian government is planning to establish a National Centre for Research, Management and Conservation of Predators, to address livestock-predator problems (4). Thus, conservation efforts are being made, but illegal activity urgently needs to be addressed, as it continues to make the future of the jaguar uncertain (5).

FIND OUT MORE

For more information on the Jaguar:

- IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group:
<http://www.catsg.org>
- Save the Jaguar:
<http://www.savethejaguar.com/>
- BBC Wildlife Finder:
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/nature/species/Jaguar>

AUTHENTICATION

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<http://www.catsg.org>

GLOSSARY

- **Crepuscular:** to be active in the early dawn or twilight.
- **Gestation:** the state of being pregnant; the period from conception to birth.
- **Melanistic:** an animal that is dark or black in colour that is not normally so. These animals are usually not pure black, as any markings can still be seen.

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