Ocelot (*Leopardus pardalis*)

Synonyms: *Felis pardalis*

Spanish: Gato Onza, Manigordo, Ocelote

Kingdom	Animalia
Phylum	Chordata
Class	Mammalia
Order	Carnivora
Family	Felidae
Genus	*Leopardus (1)*
Size	Head-body length: 55 - 101.5 cm (2) Tail length: 27 - 45 cm (2) (3)
Weight	6.6 - 18.6 kg (3) (4)

STATUS

The ocelot is classified as Least Concern (LC) on the IUCN Red List (1) and listed on Appendix I of CITES (5). However, some subspecies and in some countries it is considered threatened (6).

DESCRIPTION

The largest of the small spotted cats (3), the ocelot (*Leopardus pardalis*) is one of the best known and most common cat species in its range (1) (4) (10), and also arguably one of the most beautiful. The short, sleek fur varies in colour from tawny yellow, to reddish, to grey, and is marked with both solid black spots and open, dark-centered rosettes, which often run in parallel chains along the side of the body, the typical pattern of the species (2) (3) (4) (7) (8). The head bears black spots, two black stripes on each cheek, and a prominent white spot on the back of the otherwise black ears (2) (3) (7). There are also parallel black stripes on the neck, on which, unusually, the fur grows 'reversed', slanting forwards. The underparts are white, with one or two black bars on the insides of the legs, while the tail is banded and spotted with black (2) (3) (7) (8). Each individual ocelot has a unique coat pattern (8). The female ocelot is roughly one third smaller than the male, but otherwise similar in appearance (3) (7) (8).

The ocelot is quite a variable species, with around ten **subspecies** currently recognised (3) (9) (10). Although very similar to the closely related margay (*Leopardus wiedii*), the ocelot can be distinguished by its larger size, less plush fur, relatively smaller eyes, and by its shorter tail, which, unlike in the margay, is shorter than the hindleg, and barely touches the ground (3) (4) (7) (8).

RANGE

The ocelot is widely distributed from the extreme south of the United States, through Central and South America, and as far south as northern Argentina, occurring in every country except Chile (1) (3) (4) (10). In the United States, the species once ranged into Louisiana, Arkansas and Arizona, but a remnant population is now confined to southern Texas, with individuals only occasionally crossing into Arizona from Mexico (1) (3) (4).

HABITAT

This species occupies a wide variety of habitats, typically below elevations of about 1,200 metres (but also up to 3,800m), including all types of tropical forest, as well as mangrove forest, coastal marshes, thorn scrub and savanna grassland (1) (2) (3) (4) (7). Although it may sometimes hunt in open areas, the ocelot appears to require a sufficient amount of dense cover (2) (3) (4) (7).

BIOLOGY

The ocelot is usually most active at night, spending the day resting in a tree, thick vegetation, or under a fallen tree or brush pile, although daytime activity does also occur (2) (3) (4) (7) (8). Several individuals may use the same rest site, although not at the same time (3). The ocelot is a strong swimmer and also an agile climber, although most hunting and travelling takes place on the ground (2) (3) (7) (8). The diet includes a variety of small mammals, birds and reptiles (including iguanas, tortoises and snakes), as well as fish and also land crabs. Larger prey, such as agoutis, armadillos, monkeys, peccaries and deer are also an important part of the ocelot diet (2) (3) (4) (7) (8) (10), and the ocelot may take advantage of seasonal prey abundances, such as spawning fish (3) (4).

Although essentially solitary (7), the ocelot probably makes frequent contact with other individuals (2) (3), and males typically defend a **territory** encompassing those of two or three breeding females (3) (7). Breeding is likely to take place year-round in the tropics, but may be more seasonal elsewhere, with births reported to occur in autumn and winter in Mexico, USA, Argentina and Paraguay. The female usually gives birth to a single young, although rarely up to three or four (average of 1.4) (6), with the **gestation** period lasting around 70 to 85 days (2) (3) (4) (7). The young is born in the shelter of a den, such as in a hollow tree, cave or thicket, and the female may move it between a number of dens until it is old enough to travel with her, at about 4 to 6 weeks (3) (7). The young ocelot is born with a fully marked but rather grey coat (3) (8), and has one of the slowest growth rates of all small cats (7). The eyes are opened at around 14 to 18 days, suckling may last for 3 to 9 months, and maturity is reached at around 18 to 24 months. The female ocelot is likely to give birth only once every two years. Lifespan may be over 10 years in the wild, and up to 21 years in captivity (2) (3) (4) (7).

THREATS

As a result of its beautiful coat, the ocelot was one of the most heavily exploited small cats between the 1960s and 1970s, with as many as 200,000 taken annually for the international fur trade. Although widespread commercial hunting has since ceased due to improved legal protection, some illegal trade still persists, and the species is also in demand as a pet, with hunters often killing females for fur and taking the young for the pet trade (1) (2) (3) (4) (7). Ocelots are also sometimes killed in retaliation for taking domestic poultry (1). However, the major threat to the ocelot is now believed to be habitat loss, with forest clearance for cattle ranching and agriculture reducing the natural cover on which the ocelot depends (1) (3) (7).

Despite these threats, the ocelot remains the most abundant cat species in much of its range, reaching higher densities than smaller species such as the margay, and is even thought to negatively impact its smaller competitors (the ‘ocelot effect’) (10). However, the low reproductive rate of the ocelot, together with its need for dense cover and abundant small prey, may increase its vulnerability to environmental disturbances (2) (4). Some ocelot populations are threatened and decreasing, and the species is considered vulnerable in a number of areas (1). The species is listed as Endangered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (12), with the tiny remnant population in Texas believed to number no more than 80 to 120 animals. This population is under threat from brush clearance for agriculture and settlement, predator-control activities directed at other species, and roadkill, particularly as individuals have to travel large distances between remaining habitat patches (2) (3) (7) (13).

CONSERVATION

International trade in the ocelot is now banned under its listing on Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) (5), and the species is also legally protected in most countries (1) (3) (4), although these laws are not always enforced (3) (14). It also occurs in various protected areas across its range (1) (4). Recent molecular studies have found the ocelot to be divided into four major geographical groups, with little **gene flow** between them. It has therefore been suggested that the groups should be conserved and managed as independent units (7). In Texas, conservation efforts suggested for the species include **translocation**, preservation of brush habitat and the creation of corridors between remaining habitat patches, building of road underpasses, and the banning of traps and snares (3) (7) (13).

In general, small cat species are often not well known, but modern research techniques such as camera traps and radio tracking are starting to build up our knowledge of their ecology and behaviour (14), with initiatives such as Project Wild Cats of Brazil (Projecto Gatos do Mato - Brasil), launched in 2004, aiming to improve knowledge of these small cats and so provide a baseline for the conservation of species such as the ocelot (11).

FIND OUT MORE

To find out more about the ocelot and about the conservation of wild cat species, see:

- Nowell, K. and Jackson, P. (1996) Wild Cats: Status Survey and Conservation Action Plan. IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group, IUCN, Gland, Switzerland. Available at: http://carnivoractionplans1.free.fr/wildcats.pdf
- Murray, J.L. and Gardner, G.L. (1997) *Leopardus pardalis*. Mammalian Species, 548: 1-10. Available at: http://www.science.smith.edu/departments/Biology/VHAYSSEN/msi/pdf/i0076-3519-548-01-0001.pdf
- IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group: http://www.catsg.org/

AUTHENTICATION

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GLOSSARY

- **Gene flow:** the exchange of genes between populations. Low gene flow is often considered detrimental as it does not give the high levels of genetic variability which may help a population to adapt to changing environmental conditions. Nevertheless, a lack of gene flow between two populations can lead to genetic differences between them and, ultimately, the potential for speciation.
- **Gestation:** the state of being pregnant; the period from conception to birth.
- **Subspecies:** a population usually restricted to a geographical area that differs from other populations of the same species, but not to the extent of being classified as a separate species.
- **Territory:** an area occupied and defended by an animal, a pair of animals or a colony.
- **Translocation:** when individual living organisms from one area are transferred and released or planted in another area.

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12. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service: Species Profile - Ocelot (*Leopardus pardalis*) (September, 2009) http://ecos.fws.gov/speciesProfile/profile/speciesProfile.action?spcode=A084
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