

Wild Jaguar Photographed in Arizona

Scientists working for the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) in Arizona have obtained a photo of a jaguar, a rare visitor to the United States. The picture, taken by a camera trap placed near the U.S.-Mexican border, is the first image of this largest of New World felines in the U.S. since August 1996.

"This photo is a significant development for the conservation of jaguars in the northern part of their range," said Howard Quigley, director for WCS's Global Carnivore Program. "The individual in the photo is probably dispersing from the population south of the border. We're initiating some work in the Sonora region of Mexico to see if this population will persist and perhaps repopulate parts of the south-western United States."

Although never plentiful in the south-western US, jaguars did inhabit the area before being largely eliminated as a result of human persecution. Fewer than 20 sightings of jaguars have been confirmed since the mid-1800s. Jaguars have lost more than half of their former habitat, a sprawling range stretching from southern Arizona to northern Argentina, during the past century, according to a recent published paper in *Conservation Biology*.

The WCS-led study identifies 51 key jaguar areas in 30 different ecological types, the result of a prioritising exercise using GIS software and data from across the jaguar's entire range. WCS has begun to implement this range-wide program, funded by the car company, Jaguar North America, over a five-year period. The program has brought together experts from throughout Latin America and North America to coordinate the ground efforts to save jaguars.

Working in tandem with WCS researchers, scientists from the Arizona Game and Fish Department initiated the monitoring project in response to the jaguar photo from 1996. Since that time, the jaguar has been listed in the U.S. as an endangered species; this listing does not entail a "critical habitat" designation, since habitat in the U.S. is not necessary for the jaguar's survival.

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Big Cat Roamed South of Tucson

The Arizona Daily Star (5 February 2002) said the jaguar had been photographed in early December south of Tucson. The Arizona Game and Fish Department would not reveal the location of the December sighting to protect the jaguar, but the Star said the photo was taken in an oak wood at 5,000 ft (1,500 m).

The last known photographs of a jaguar in Arizona were taken in 1996, one in the Baboquivari Mountains west of Tucson and one in the Peloncillo Mountains, along the New Mexico border near San Simon.

The new photograph was taken by a remote, motion-activated camera that was set to monitor potential jaguar corridors near the border. Such cameras have been in place since 1997, but until now none had recorded a jaguar.

A team of biologists hopes more photos like the December one will help pinpoint the location of a jaguar. The plan is to capture one, attach a collar with a radio transmitter, then return the jaguar to the wild and monitor its movement.

Arizona is believed to be at the northern end of the jaguar's historic range, which once covered nearly all of Latin America. Now, the closest known population to Tucson is 135 miles south, deep in the Sierra Madre of Mexico, according to Arizona Game and Fish.

David Hodges, executive director of the Tucson-based Sky Island Alliance, said the jaguar was photographed in a large, roadless area with abundant deer that was previously identified as prime habitat for reintroduction of wolves.

"This points to the importance of large roadless areas if we're going to have species like jaguars and wolves as permanent residents," he said.

Hodges stated that there was evidence that the jaguar photographed in December had taken up residence in the area because several campers had sighted "a large spotted cat" in the previous few months. Game and Fish officials say they routinely field calls about possible jaguar sightings, but many people misidentify a bobcat or mountain lion.