

ENVIRONMENT

Phoenix Zoo researcher spots an ocelot on trail cam, the first in the area for 50 years

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Kinley Ragan was hiking through the Atascosa Highlands in 105-degree heat last month, hoping to glimpse the wildlife captured on her trail cameras. As a field research project manager for the Phoenix Zoo, she set up 50 cameras throughout that region of southern Arizona to survey wildlife.

She has observed 20 species of mammals during the zoo's Atascosa Complex study, from mountain lions to all four species of skunk, but hoped to see something rarer.

Since April, the Arizona Center for Nature Conservation and Phoenix Zoo researchers have set up game cameras across the Coronado National Forest's Nogales Ranger District.

As Ragan flipped through photos during her fifth camera check of the day, she almost gave up hope when she realized she had hundreds of photos of a branch that had slowly grown in front of the camera.

Finally, after going back far enough, the branch peeled away to reveal some wildlife moseying by. Nothing out of the ordinary — until she saw what looked like a spotted cat slinking through the frame, its eyes glowing in the dark.

Ragan's trail camera had captured an ocelot, a critically endangered species and the first one in the area in over 50 years.

"It's always exciting to see any animal, but to see one that is of such a high status and is important to the region, really sat with us and it was very exciting," Ragan said.

Another ocelot, 'Lil' Jefe', had been seen wandering the state for the last decade, but the

Arizona Game and Fish Department examined the footage from June 12, and confirmed this cat is a newcomer.

“AZGFD has conducted a pelage spot analysis comparing this ocelot with the current known ocelot in the state, as well as previous ocelots, and concludes that this is indeed a new ocelot,” said Tracy McCarthy, the department’s regional nongame specialist.

This ocelot is the seventh to roam Arizona in the last 20 years.

Researchers believe the Atascosa Highlands wildlife corridor is an understudied area and hope to survey animals to better protect endangered species like ocelots and understand their impact on the ecosystem.

Endangered cat: Ocelots try to survive in a world that barely knows they exist

Why are ocelots endangered?

Although ocelots have an expansive range from Arizona and Texas to Argentina, they are critically endangered in the U.S. The population is declining overall, but the cats were added to the endangered species list in 1972, and fewer than 100 are believed to live in the U.S. today.

Biologists are concerned ocelot subpopulations could become extinct in certain regions, threatening the longevity and durability of the species overall.

The U.S. likely does not have a breeding population, as only seven males have been seen wandering Arizona in recent years. The closest population is in Sonora, Mexico, where ocelots are also listed as endangered.

Males tend to travel farther than females because females have to be confident in a habitat and its resources to raise their offspring.

“We’re missing habitat and the connectivity to facilitate that movement and other stressors and dangers that may be occurring along the way,” Ragan said.

Unburdened by a litter of kits, male ocelots follow their instincts to explore new habitats, seeking new mates.

Ocelot populations declined in the U.S. due to habitat loss, a lack of habitat connectivity, stressors from climate change like drought and extreme heat and the inability to cross

roads or other infrastructure.

Ragan hopes the study can help inform recovery efforts for the ocelot and other endangered species in southern Arizona. The ocelot's rarity and its habitat are similar to jaguars, another endangered big cat roaming the borderlands.

Wandering cat: Trail cam confirms 'Lil' Jefe' the ocelot still roams the mountains of southeast Arizona

Why are ocelots important to their ecosystems?

The Atascosa Highlands is an arid, grassland ecosystem, and while it is brimming with wildlife, Ragan and her colleagues did not expect to see an ocelot.

“We were surprised because there hasn’t been a formal record of ocelots in this mountain range in 50 years, and the records from the 1980s aren’t fully verified,” Ragan said. “But ocelots are known to have quite a variable range.”

Other ocelots have been tracked through the Huachuca and Santa Rita mountains, roaming mountain and forest lands, and most of the population resides in tropical environments in Central America.

This ocelot was found in a lower-elevation desert area, exhibiting the species' ability to survive in diverse habitats.

“In the big picture of ocelots, this is a habitat we know they could exist in, but it’s just never been recorded in Arizona,” she added.

Regardless of the habitat, ocelots play an important role in any ecosystem. Feline predators help manage prey populations and control diseases. They are prey to larger species, and their feces spread nutrients throughout the environment.

“They’re part of the lifecycle process,” Ragan said. “Every animal has a role in that ecosystem, so maintaining that recognition of each species having importance is vital to the continued balance of our world.”

Will we see this ocelot again?

Ragan hopes this won’t be the only time she spots the ocelot in the Atascosa Highlands.

She will continue monitoring her trail cameras and hopes to learn more about ocelots and other wildlife movements throughout the region.

“It’s a very unassuming region, but once you start diving into the area, it really captures your heart,” Ragan said. “It just makes you have a better awareness of the species moving through that area and occupying, to us, what seems like a really arid region.”

She serviced half of her cameras on her most recent expedition through the desert and hopes to return to find other species, maybe even a jaguar.

Researchers and hobbyist wildlife watchers have focused on other areas in southern Arizona, and Ragan believes the Atascosa Highlands have been understudied.

This is the first formal mammal assessment in the ecosystem, and she hopes it will inform wildlife managers, landowners, cattle ranchers and the community about wildlife in the area.

“We’re excited to see if this was a one-off and what this means for the area,” she said. “Are there more? Now that we are formally surveying it, what else can we uncover in this beautiful landscape?”

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