



Wildlife Notes

Jaguar (*Panthera onca*)

In the extreme southwestern corner of New Mexico, sometimes referred to as the 'Bootheel,' are found flora and fauna which usually only thrive much farther south.

In the early dawn on March 7, 1996, while leading a mountain lion hunt in the rugged mountains of this region, guide and rancher Warner Glenn and his daughter Kelly encountered something rarely seen north of the Mexican border—a jaguar.

Moments into the initial up-canyon trek, his six dogs were hot on the trail of what Glenn assumed to be a mountain lion, though he was puzzled by odd shaped, fresh tracks along the way. Urging his mount into a trot when possible . . . he pursued the barking hounds for four hours and nearly twice that many miles. Little more than a stone's throw across the line into New Mexico, Glenn finally caught up with his dogs, who were causing a commotion down a nearby slope. He scrambled to where they were frantically baying at a buff colored, black-spotted cat, perched majestically atop a bluff.

"I was completely shocked to see a very large, absolutely beautiful jaguar crouched on top, watching the hounds circling below," said Glenn in his book, Eyes of Fire: Encounter with a Borderlands Jaguar. Luckily, before the jaguar fled Glenn had snapped 15 photographs.

Historically Hard to Find

Jaguars once roamed portions of Arizona, New Mexico, southeast Texas, southern Louisiana and southern California — but today primarily inhabit tropical and subtropical environments from Argentina to northern Mexico.

Infrequently, jaguars follow corridors of riparian vegetation into other habitats, including the American Southwest. Between 1540–1996, only 20 jaguar sightings in New Mexico were reported—15 in the 1900s, eleven of which were before 1906.

Of the more recent sightings, two occurred in the 1930s and three in the 1990s. Prior to Glenn's sighting in 1996, the most recent sighting was on April 19, 1995, when Bryan Starret took photos of jaguar tracks in the Peloncillo Mountains.

In 1990, a professor from New Mexico Highlands University, Dr. Gerald Jacobi, reported seeing a jaguar for about 30 seconds in the Black Range of the Gila National Forest near Beaverhead, New Mexico. His written description was unmistakably a jaguar, but unfortunately no physical evidence or photographs were preserved.

In recent years, regular sightings of jaguars in Arizona were commonplace until the late 1960s. Jaguars were illegally killed in Arizona in 1971 and 1986—and amazingly a month after Glenn took his photos in 1996, another jaguar was photographed in the Baboquivari Mountains of Arizona.



Biology

Jaguars have a cinnamon-buff coat covered with tawny spots ringed in black and a white underside with black spots. In their southern range individuals may exhibit a solid black phase.

Jaguars are the largest cat in the Western Hemisphere. Adult males average 200 pounds and six–eight feet from head to tail. The jaguar is the only North American cat that roars.

With a home range, usually 3–15 miles in diameter, the jaguar hunts primarily on the ground, but will climb and sometimes ambush prey by leaping from limbs or ledges.

Solitary, except during breeding and while rearing young, jaguar mothers care for litters of 1–4 cubs for about two years. Jaguars live in the wild approximately 11 years.

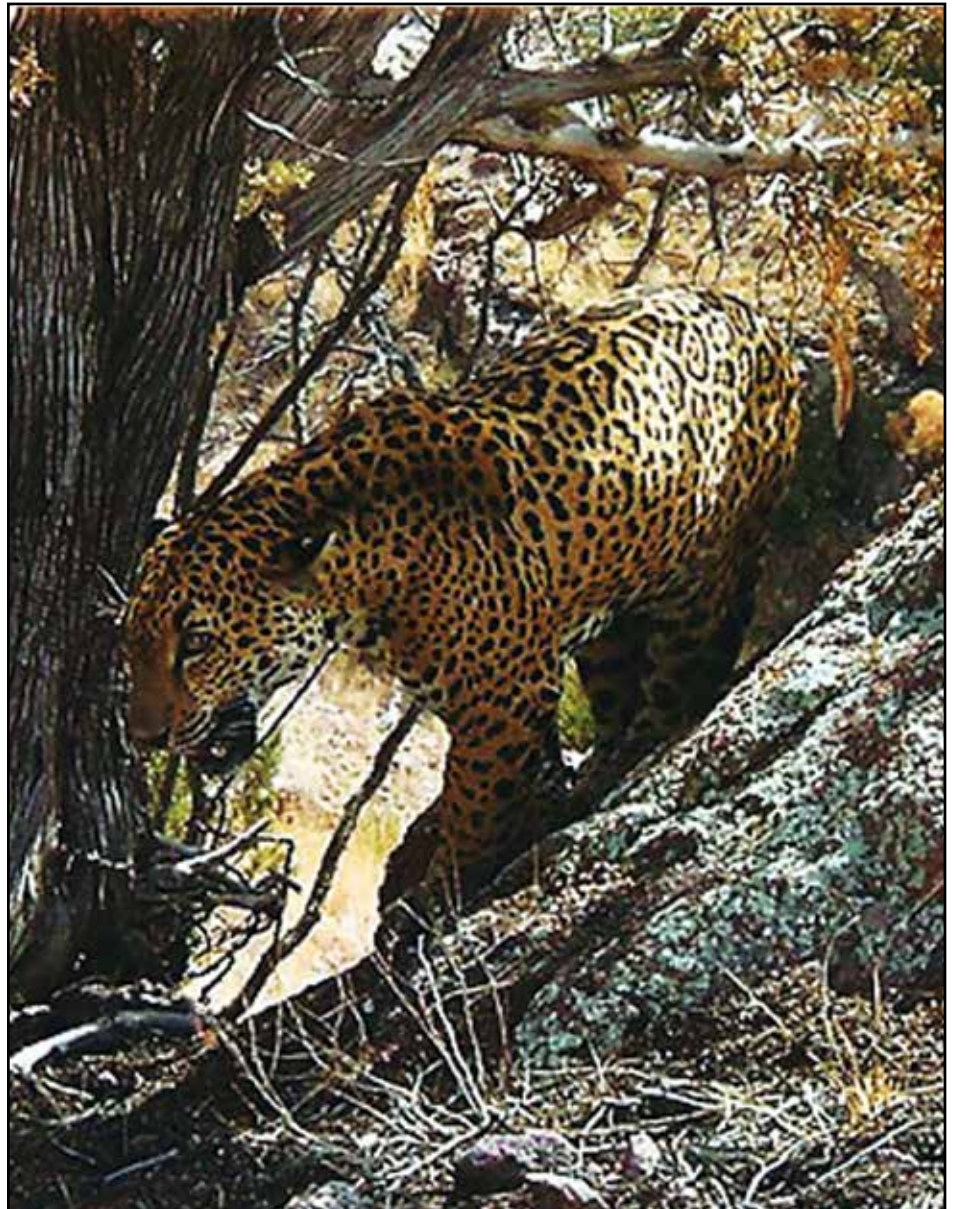
With such a large range of habitats, diet varies with each locale and includes more than 85 foods, including javelina, taper, deer, rabbits, armadillos, turtles, large birds, reptiles and fish.

The Jaguar's Future

Prominent threats to the jaguar in New Mexico include poaching, habitat destruction and obstruction of its travel corridors by man-made barriers.

To protect the jaguar's historic range in the American Southwest, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service declared the jaguar an endangered species in 1977.

The New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, in consort with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, compiles information to aid management and protection of the jaguar and eliminate threats to its survival.



Cornered jaguar during the 1996 Glenn hunt. Photo by Warner Glenn.

One of our current challenges is to learn more about this elusive mammal's behavior and adaptation in New Mexico. Present knowledge of the jaguar in the tropics can be applied only partially to its northern-most range which is a dramatically different habitat.

Current research in Mexico, Arizona and New Mexico hopefully will answer questions about the activities and behavior of jaguars in the borderland areas. Sighting by remote photography have occurred as recently as 2012, but it remains uncertain whether jaguars are traveling or remaining and breeding in New Mexico and adjacent regions.



New Mexico Department of Game and Fish www.wildlife.state.nm.us
Conserving New Mexico's Wildlife for Future Generations