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Threats to Rare U.S. Jaguar Increase Along with Sightings

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Editor's Note: The jaguar is back. The big cat — the New World's largest — is popularly linked to Latin American jungles. But increasingly, motion-triggered cameras are capturing images of jaguars between Tucson and the Mexican border, where the endangered feline must contend with activity from drug smugglers and border patrol officers, as well as development.

TUCSON, Ariz.—As the number of sightings of wild jaguars increases in southeastern Arizona, the endangered cat faces a host of unexpected new threats from drug smugglers, border patrol officers and builders of a proposed power line.

Popularly linked to the jungles of Latin America, a small population of jaguars once roamed wilderness areas of the West from California to Texas. Ranchers and hunters were believed to have wiped them out by the mid-20th century. Since 1996, however, there have been a dozen confirmed sightings of the feline in Arizona and New Mexico. Five times since last June, photos and tracks have documented the presence of jaguars between Tucson and the Mexican border.

While the return of jaguars to the U.S. is hailed as a conservation victory by environmentalists and biologists, it may be short-lived. A major increase in illegal border traffic along Arizona's southern border this year has brought more human activity into the remote areas that jaguars prefer, while the rare animal's presence has also attracted the interest of trophy hunters and ranchers, who would just as soon shoot such a cat as protect one. At least one researcher now carries a gun with him in the field as protection against humans, not jaguars. Another wildlife biologist has been confronted at gunpoint by smugglers bringing contraband into the U.S. over backcountry trails.

Last July, the Tucson Electric Power Company disclosed plans to build a high-voltage power line through the area where motion-sensitive cameras have been photographing jaguars regularly since 2001.

“Within the last year, the border has become a very difficult place to work,” concedes Jack Childs, a retired Tucson land surveyor who videotaped a jaguar near that city in 1996 and now maintains a network of 30 motion-triggered cameras designed to capture wildlife images. “If we're going to save the jaguar, we've got to act fast, and we're going to need help.”

Emil McCain, a Humboldt State University wildlife biologist responsible for the most recent jaguar photos, worries that stepped-up U.S. Border Patrol activity may drive the cats into Mexico, where poachers shoot them with impunity. Hunting of the jaguar is illegal in Mexico, but enforcement is lax.

“Jaguars avoid areas of human activity,” says McCain, who has studied the animals in Costa Rica, Panama and Mexico. “The invasive strategies of the Border Patrol could already be having a very negative impact on these cats.” He cites the agency’s frequent inspections by jeeps and airplanes as well as its use of bright lights, impenetrable walls and barbed-wire fencing. Increasingly, self-appointed vigilantes have joined the enforcement effort, determined to discourage illegal immigration.

“Only about 70 to 100 jaguars persist in a small colony in Sonora,” the northwestern state in Mexico that borders Arizona, says Bill Van Pelt of the Arizona Department of Game and Fish. “We believe those we’re seeing in the U.S. are males dispersing north from that colony.”

Van Pelt, McCain and other scientists say more research is needed to understand why jaguars have returned to the American Southwest. One theory holds such cats — the New World’s largest — are being forced north by hunting pressures and dwindling habitat in Mexico and Central America. Another theory suggests jaguars are following some of their favorite prey, which includes javelinas and coatis, as global warming pushes these subtropical mammals into areas that have become more hospitable.

Answering such questions with precision poses a race against time for jaguars, which experts believe could easily disappear from most of their habitat within 25 years. An estimated 8,000 to 10,000 jaguars remain in the wild, but they are now imperiled across two-thirds of their historic range, according to a 2002 study published in the journal *Conservation Biology*. Study of the animal within the United States may help save them in other parts of their range, which extends through South America as far as Argentina.

The re-election of President Bush may not bode well for the jaguar. The Republican administration has promoted greater commercial exploitation of roadless areas and reduced funding to many wildlands protection programs. In 2003, the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity led other environmental groups in a lawsuit against the federal government after the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service declined to map “critical habitat” and create a recovery plan for the jaguar, a designated endangered species. In a September settlement of the lawsuit, the agency agreed to decide by July 2006 on protection of areas considered vital to the feline’s recovery. A quasi-official group called the Jaguar Conservation Team will continue meeting semi-annually to hone a conservation strategy already in development.

“This is the most jaguars that have been seen at one time, in one area, since the early 20th century,” notes Michael Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity. “But the clock is ticking and the time for decisive action is now.”

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