

Ghost Cat

A hunter pursuing mountain lions in New Mexico last winter nabbed a jaguar instead—on film. The photograph, the fifth confirmed sighting of the spotted cat in the Southwest during the past decade, raises an issue that has vexed biologists for decades: Are U.S. lands essential to the jaguar's survival?

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service doesn't seem to think so. Although the jaguar is federally endangered, in July the agency declined to designate critical habitat for the species in Arizona and New Mexico. Such designations prevent commercial development and other land uses in areas where endangered species might recover. The FWS concluded that the Southwest is on the fringe of jaguar range and thus not essential for the animal's survival. "We don't have an established jaguar population in the U.S.," says Mark Crites, a FWS biologist in Tucson.

But before photographs documented the presence of jaguars in the United States, bullets did. During the 1900s more than 60 were killed in Arizona and New Mexico. The last female jaguar confirmed in the United States was shot in 1963. The FWS now contends that if the cats aren't breeding here, their habitat cannot be critical.

Michael Robinson, who heads carnivore conservation at the **Center for Biological Diversity**, says the FWS refuses to acknowledge the importance of U.S. habitats to the survival of jaguars. Information on how many jaguars roam North and South America is spotty, especially when it comes to figures for this country. Nocturnal and shy, the big cats (they can be five to seven feet long and can weigh more than 200 pounds) travel solo through riparian terrain, hiding in caves and bushes. Fossil records show that they ranged as far north as the Grand Canyon and as far east as Louisiana.

But despite the animal's relatively sporadic presence today, the Jaguar Conservation Team, a coalition of government agencies, environmentalists, and ranchers, identified 62 million U.S. acres as potential jaguar habitat earlier this year. If protected, such vast expanses could also help restore other species—southwestern willow flycatchers, for example, and yellow-billed cuckoos.

Meanwhile, the **Northern Jaguar Project**, an Arizona-based conservation group, plans to expand the Los Pasos Jaguar Reserve in the Mexican state of Sonora to more than 40,000 acres by purchasing cattle ranches adjacent to the reserve. It will then transfer ownership of the ranches to a Mexican counterpart. These measures could help replenish jaguar numbers farther north. "Oh, yes, it's a possibility," says Crites. "If they do well in Mexico, it certainly looks like we will get more individuals coming up."

That is, if the cats can make the trip. They face another hurdle: heightened border security. The measures are designed to keep illegal immigrants from entering the country, but the fences, constant human presence, and stadium-style lights disrupt wildlife movements as well. "It's detrimental to all the wildlife [seeking to cross]," says Diana Hadley, president of the Northern Jaguar Project.

Without critical habitat it will be tough for Mexico's emblematic cat to reclaim the northern stretches of its homeland. So the **Center for Biological Diversity**, which fought to have the cat listed as endangered, is now suing the FWS for violating the Endangered Species Act. As the legal wrangling over the jaguar's future continues, **Robinson** hopes that more lucky southwesterners catch a glimpse of the elusive animal: "A lot of people are tremendously heartened by the comebacks of rare species."—*Melissa Mahony*