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Jaguar, a rare breed in Arizona, is not just a fancy muscle car

BY BILL COATES
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Jack Childs' southern Arizona home looks out across a rolling desert landscape. From his study, he can see the Baboquivari Mountains some 30 miles to the west. That's where — 12 years ago — he first encountered the jaguar now pictured on his living room wall.

It's next to the stuffed mountain lion on his mantel.

The mountain lion he shot only once, and legally. The jaguar has been shot repeatedly, with more than 50 cameras that Childs and biologist Emil McCain have rigged in trees from the New Mexico border to the Baboquivaris.

The cameras are part of an effort led by Childs to monitor the presence of jaguars in the United States. The cameras sense motion, and much has moved past them: mountain lions, black bears, bobcats, coyotes, foxes, javelina, four species of skunks and lots of people.

As for the jaguars, they're few and far between.

"Right now, there's only two that we located," says Childs, a retired land surveyor. "One disappeared about four years ago. It could have gone back to Mexico, who knows?"

Two others have been documented inside the United States by Douglas rancher Warner Glenn.

Childs' group, the Borderlands Jaguar Detection Project, last photographed a jaguar in late 2007. One hasn't been seen since. None of the four is a female.

Species don't get much more endangered than this.

The nearest females are in Mexico, up to 150 miles south of the border. They make up what is regarded as the northern-most breeding population of jaguars in North America. If that population stays healthy, jaguars should continue to find their way into Arizona and New Mexico.

But there are barriers, and they include more than just the rugged geography of the borderlands.

The U.S. government plans to erect a border fence to staunch the flow of human traffic coming up from Mexico. Biologists say a pedestrian fence will do a much better job of stopping wildlife, including the jaguar.

On top of that, not everyone agrees how best to protect the cat rarely seen. The Center for Biological Diversity, a southwest environmental group, contends too little has been done to define critical jaguar habitat.

Instead of emphasizing habitat, however, Arizona Game and Fish and its counterpart in New Mexico formed a group — the Jaguar Conservation Team — to study and manage jaguars in the borderlands, in partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

But the center's conservation advocate, Michael Robinson, says U.S. Fish and Wildlife and its predecessor long had a mindset antithetical to jaguar protection. It began in the 1900s as the agency pledged to kill jaguars, along with other predators.

"They had a policy to wipe out every jaguar, a written policy," Robinson says. "They pursued them with traps, with dogs, they even poisoned them."

The jaguar was hunted as game as well. The hunt was what counted, literally.

Among the 60 jaguars counted in Arizona and New Mexico from the late 1800s through the mid-1980s, all had been shot. Where they were killed gives some idea of the animal's range. A female and kittens were killed in the Grand Canyon.

The last jaguar shot in the United States was killed by a rancher east of Willcox. That was in 1986. Killing a jaguar, by then, was a misdemeanor under Arizona law, though the species had not yet been listed as endangered. The rancher was never charged.

In March 1996, rancher and hunting guide Glenn took a different approach. He and his daughter Kelly Glenn-Kimbro led a mountain lion hunt through the Peloncillo Mountains about 20 miles south of Clifton. His hounds spotted a large cat and gave chase. On a rocky ledge, they trapped what turned out to be a jaguar.

"That thing roared, that thing darn sure roared," Glenn says.

Glenn put away his rifle and pulled out a camera, documenting the first time a jaguar had been seen since 1986. He called off the dogs, and the jaguar went about his way.

Glenn talks about his experience from the dining table of his ranch house, an eccentric arrangement of office spaces and living quarters. Born for the role he now plays, Glenn, 72, is lanky, tall and has wisps of white hair flowing out from beneath his cowboy hat. Like a cowboy, he's polite. He removes his hat at the table, if just for an interview.

His ranch, some 15,000 acres of privately held and leased state trust land, backs up to the Mexican border. The Border Patrol accounts for the heaviest traffic on the 16 miles of dirt road leading from Douglas to his ranch.

Inside, the artwork on his wall includes enlarged pictures of the jaguar he photographed more than 10 years ago.

They were, Glenn notes, the first photographs taken of a wild jaguar north of the border — that is, a living jaguar.

But it wasn't the last. Childs and a hunting companion, Matt Colvin, cornered another jaguar five months later on a hunting trip in the Baboquivari Mountains near the border southwest of Tucson. Colvin "captured" the animal with a still camera. Childs got it on videotape.

Like snowflakes, no two spot patterns on a jaguar are alike, Childs says. As it happens, the jaguar he and Colvin treed is the same one pictured on his wall, captured by remote camera, often.

"We've got some 60 pictures of the same animal," Childs says.

He pegged this animal as a 130-pound male. In South America,

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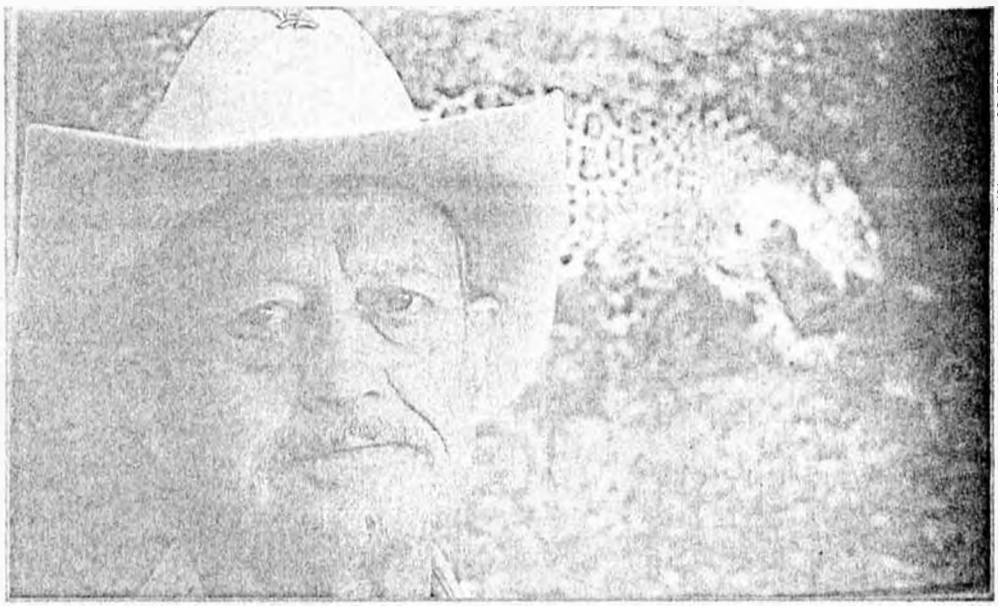

PHOTO BY BILL COATES

Jaguar Detected

Jack Childs stands near a photograph of a jaguar on the wall of his house in southern Arizona. The picture was taken by a remote camera placed by Childs' Borderlands Jaguar Detection Project.

Jaguar

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jaguars typically are much larger.

A year after the 1996 photographs came to light, the jaguar was listed as endangered by U.S. Fish and Wildlife.

Glenn says plans to list the jaguar had been in the works for several years, but he thinks the pictures he and Childs took might have helped grease the wheels.

"It didn't bring about it being listed," Glenn says. But he adds: "I think both of those probably prompted them to do something about it."

That and a lawsuit filed in late 1996 by the Center for Biological Diversity. The center said Fish and Wildlife should have listed the jaguar in 1972. The agency later said the jaguar and a few other species had been overlooked at that time.

The center has since notified Fish and Wildlife it intends to sue again, claiming the agency has failed to designate critical jaguar habitat in the United States, as required by the Endangered Species Act, Robinson says.

"What we've seen is a significant breakdown of all their significant commitments to conserve jaguars," Robinson says.

The center also wants a recovery plan to restore a species that once roamed what is now the southern United States, he adds.

"Jaguars are a North American species that were found historically from California to the Carolinas, so not just along the borderlands," Robinson says.

That's a claim disputed by Arizona Game and Fish's point-man on the jaguar, Bill Van Pelt, the agency's non-game mammal and bird program manager.

Evidence suggests, he says, that a jaguar's current range north of the border differs little from the historical record — that is, sightings since the 1800s.

There's little to recover, he says, when 99 percent of the jaguar's habitat is outside the United States. Its range extends southward to Argentina, though it's most commonly found in the tropics. But what is in Arizona and New Mexico, he adds, should be protected.

He asks and answers his own question: "Can you contribute to the conservation of species in the United States? You bet, 100 percent."

Ranchers such as Glenn want to see the jaguar protected as well. But Glenn says designating critical habitat could put restrictions on ranching. That, in the end, would hurt the jaguar, he says. Ranchers, he adds, have kept open spaces and prevented development that could destroy habitat.

"The Center for Biological Diversity doesn't like to face it," Glenn says, "but ranching is the reason that jaguar is up here."

Both sides want to see the jaguar in the United States, even if they disagree on the approach. And they both agree that the well-being of jaguars north of the border depends on their fate in Mexico, where Arizona jaguars were most likely born and bred.

PHOTO BY BILL COATES

Calling off the Dogs

Warner Glenn and his hounds tracked the jaguar — pictured behind him — for eight miles before his hounds finally cornered it on a rocky ledge. Until he got a closer look, he thought it was a mountain lion. After taking pictures, Glenn called off his dogs.

"We won't have jaguars in the United States if we don't conserve them in Mexico," Van Pelt of Game and Fish says.

Game and Fish officials have been working with their counterparts to protect jaguars in Mexico, he says. Unlike the United States, however, Mexico has little in the way of public lands for jaguar protection. Over the years, jaguar habitat there has been cut in half.

But one non-governmental group in Mexico has worked to change that.

Naturalia owns the 45,000-acre Northern Jaguar Reserve in Sonora. Most of the land was recently purchased for $1.5 million with the help of the Northern Jaguar Project in Tucson. The money came from individual donors and foundations.

Diana Hadley, president of the Northern Jaguar Project, says the reserve represents the convergence of many ecological zones.

"You can stand in one canyon and you'll be surrounded by oak and palm trees," Hadley says.

Oscar Moctezuma, a biologist and general director of Naturalia, says while jaguars do best in the tropics, they get by in the reserve.

"The quality of it is not as high as the tropical rain forest," he says in a phone interview from Mexico City. "The population density is low, naturally low."

From 80 to 120 jaguars inhabit the reserve and the remote rugged area surrounding it, the jaguar project said in a February news release.

Ranchers still pose a threat to the jaguar in Mexico, however. They see the cat as a threat to livestock. But Moctezuma says Naturalia has begun paying ranchers to bring in photographs of jaguars, instead of shooting them.

The ranchers don't actually snap the picture. They let Naturalia set up remote cameras on their ranchland. When jaguars are captured on film, ranchers get money.

Moctezuma adds: "It's given them an income from the presence of jaguars."

In southeast Arizona, the Malpai Borderlands Group, a conservation organization largely made up of ranchers, has set up a fund to reimburse ranchers for livestock killed by jaguars. To date, one rancher has collected, says Glenn, one of the Malpai founders.

While not conclusive, the kill pointed to a jaguar, Glenn says. The rancher was given $500.

Glenn does not worry about a few more jaguars making their way from Mexico. He wants to see them in Arizona, as long as they have an adequate prey base, such as deer and other animals it can take for food.

The Northern Arizona Project, for one, wants jaguars to have free passage from Mexico to the United States. Moctezuma of Naturalia says geography alone is not an impediment. Jaguars travel north along mountain ranges, he says.

"There are corridors," he says. "They are already there."

Humans have their own corridors. Illegal immigrants have been crossing the borders in more remote areas as border-towns have been walled off. They tramp across ranchlands owned by Glenn and his neighbors. Or drive. Glenn's wife, Wendy, warns visitors to pull over if they see a car racing down the dirt road leading to their ranch. It's likely somebody fleeing from the Border Patrol, she says.

The Border Patrol and its parent agency, the Department of Homeland Security, have a plan to stop the people: hundreds of miles of fencing.

Robinson of the Center for Biological Diversity says it likely wouldn't work as advertised.

Pedestrian fences, he says, "won't stop bipeds with ladders, but they will stop jaguars."

It's a widely shared sentiment among jaguar advocates. From rancher Glenn to Van Pelt at Game and Fish, all suggest a solid border fence could lock out the jaguars, as well as other wildlife.

But Glenn, for one, is not as quick to criticize the Border Patrol.

"Their job is to protect the border and stop illegal immigration, and those guys are told to do it," he says.

He says a virtual fence might be the answer. Here, Border Patrol could detect movement across the border by means of cameras and a variety of sensors. The virtual fence could become a tool for monitoring wildlife, not hindering it, says Hadley of the Northern Jaguar Project.

The Border Patrol could become frontline biologists, she says.

"We would love to have them as allies in the preservation of multiple endangered species," Hadley says.

For now, people continue to find their way into Arizona. They come looking for work or sneaking in drugs to sell. They have, it turns out, directly affected the jaguar study being carried out by Childs. When his biologist, McCain, collected flash cards from the remote cameras earlier this year, he came back with no pictures of jaguars.

That might have had as much to do with the condition of the cameras as the rarity of the animal.

"We had a lot of cameras smashed by dope smugglers," Childs said.