

ENVIRONMENT

Ocelot – King of our jungle

WHEN you think of wild cats, very often the image that comes to mind is that of lions on the African savanna or perhaps a jaguar lurking in the Amazon jungle. But you need not look that far afield to find a wild cat as we have our own right here in Trinidad – the ocelot.

The ocelot (*Leopardus pardalis*) is a neotropical feline, which is a fancy way of saying it's a wild cat from forests of the South and Central America. A small population of fewer than 100 individuals exist in parts of the southern USA (Texas and Arizona). There are currently ten recognised ocelot subspecies, and those found in Trinidad, Venezuela and Guyana are classified as *Leopardus pardalis melanurus*.

On the mainland, it is a flexible species, able to survive in a range of habitats from rainforests to savanna to swamps. In Trinidad it appears to be mostly limited to forested regions but will occasionally venture into human settlements at the forest edge to find food. The ocelot is not found in Tobago.

Ocelots can be thought of as miniature jaguars. They are about the size of an average domestic dog but tend to be shorter with a long tail. The appearance of an ocelot varies but its coat is usually a mixture of stripes and spots. This is referred to as disruptive camouflage as the markings serve to break up the outline of the cat and make it harder for them to be seen. The markings on an ocelot are usually distinctive enough to allow different individuals to be readily identified.

They are carnivores, feeding entirely on meat. In the wild, ocelots will take a range of prey including small animals, such as rats, lizards, birds or fish, or larger animals, such as opossums (manicou to you and me). It is sometimes claimed that ocelots are a major predator of agouti, and while an ocelot will undoubtedly take an occasional agouti, they are unlikely to be major predators. This is because ocelots are mostly nocturnal, which is to say that they are primarily active at night. Agoutis, on the other hand, are strictly creatures of the day. As such there is little opportunity for the two species to cross paths.

As mentioned, ocelots sometimes enter villages in forested areas to find food and a midnight raid on a chicken coup or pet birdcage is not unheard of.

After all that prowling at night it is not surprising that ocelots can spend a lot of their daylight



hours resting. Often this takes place high in a tree as ocelots, like most cats, are good climbers. They are usually solitary with a single male ocelot occupying a given territory. The size of this territory varies depending on the carrying capacity of the area and its topography. The range of one or two females may overlap this territory and it will be these females which the male will breed with.

The status of the ocelot in Trinidad is unclear. They can be found in forests throughout the island but the size and sustainability of the population is not known. Recent camera trapping surveys in different parts of the country have confirmed their continued presence. Threats to the ocelot in Trinidad include habitat destruction and killing by some hunters who see it as a danger to their dogs. Sadly, there are some poachers who will opportunistically kill ocelots they encounter, as an exotic "wild meat".

Outside of Trinidad, ocelots are sometimes caught for the illegal pet trade and it is quite likely that this also occurs in Trinidad although the scale of this activity is unknown. According to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, the ocelot is an Appendix 1 species, meaning that commercial trade is prohibited. Internationally, there was a time when ocelots were hunted for their lovely coats to satisfy the fur trade, but thankfully this practice has declined.

Part of the reason for the lack of information is that ocelots are very secretive animals and it is not often that animals are encountered alive unless they are trapped or cornered by dogs. However



OCELOTS have very distinctive markings which allow individuals to be distinguished from one another.



THE ocelot (*Leopardus pardalis*) is our only native species of cat. It was declared an Environmentally Sensitive Species in 2013.

they remain with us for a long time to come. Ocelots can be seen at our Emperor Valley Zoo. Specimens also exist in private collections, sometimes with or sometimes without legal permission from the authorities to do so.

The ocelot was declared an Environmentally Sensitive Species in February 2013 which should provide an additional level of protection for the species. Despite this, the threats to these cats are many and it is up to us to ensure that

Today's feature was written by Kris Sookdeo. For more information on our natural environment, you can contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at admin@tfncl.org or visit our website at www.tfncl.org. The Club's next monthly meeting will be held on 9 October 2014 at St Mary's College, PoS.