

SOUTH TEXAS WILDLIFE



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at Texas A&M University-Kingsville

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Louis Harveson

THE WILD CATS OF TEXAS

by Michael Tewes

Four different species of wild cats currently reside in Texas. These include the mountain lion, bobcat, ocelot, and jaguarundi. Two species that once occurred in Texas but are no longer found here are the jaguar and margay.

Overall, little is known about these predators. Consequently, we began the Feline Research Center here at the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute, Texas A&M University-Kingsville. Since 1981, we have been studying this rich di-

versity of cats found in Texas. Currently, we have active research projects involving the mountain lion, bobcat, ocelot, and jaguarundi.

Mountain Lion

Familiar names of the mountain lion include cougar, puma, and panther. An adult generally weighs from 90 to 130 pounds; males are larger than females. The diet of mountain lions is mainly white-tailed deer, feral hogs, javelina, and occasionally cattle. Mountain lions primarily occupy the mountain ranges of west Texas and many of the larger ranches in the brush country of south Texas. They are increasingly seen in the Hill Country and other parts of Texas.

Bobcat

The bobcat is the most common wild feline in Texas and North America. They are considerably smaller than the mountain lion; the typical bobcat weighs about 15 to 25 pounds. Contrary to its name, the bobcat does not have a “bobbed” tail. Although shorter than other felines, the bobcat’s tail measures 6 to 8 inches. The bobcat’s diet is primarily rabbits and rodents, and occasionally some birds.

Ocelot

The ocelot’s yellow fur is covered with black spots, bars, and blotches; black rings encircle its long tail, giving it the nickname “leopard cat”. Similar to the bob-

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cat, an adult ocelot weighs from 15 to 25 pounds, and prefers to dine on rabbits, rodents, and birds.

Today, the ocelot's distribution is restricted to only 2 or 3 locations in the south Texas brush country. The ocelot population in Texas is very small—possibly no more than 80 to 120 individuals. This scarcity may be the result of several factors, but the most important seems to be the ocelot's dependence on extremely dense brush as its preferred habitat.

Jaguarundi

Jaguarundis range over many areas of South and Central America. Similar to the ocelot, the northern limit of the jaguarundi's range is south Texas. The jaguarundi is likely the rarest cat in Texas. A road-killed jaguarundi near Brownsville in 1986 was the first documented report in about 15 years. This record suggests that the jaguarundi may still reside in Texas.

In 1991, we began a field study in northeast Mexico and have captured 17 jaguarundis over the past 5 years. Jaguarundis are more common in this region and by studying them, we will obtain valuable information about the habitat requirements needed for a viable population. These results can then be used to assist conservation efforts for the jaguarundi in Texas.

The future management and well-being of wild cats in Texas will depend on the cooperative efforts of the many private landowners and the wildlife agencies entrusted to preserving and maintaining these truly remarkable wild cats.

If you would like to support wildlife research send a tax-deductible contribution to:

Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute, Texas A&M University-Kingsville Campus Box 218 Kingsville, TX 78363

Wildlife by the Numbers

2	average number of eggs laid by sandhill cranes
150	original number of snow monkeys in south Texas
4	number of chambers in a deer's stomach
68	number of Attwater's prairie chickens in the wild
158	population size of the endangered whooping crane
106.7°	average body temperature of bobwhite quail

MANAGING WARM-SEASON FOOD PLOTS

by Tim Fulbright

Many factors determine the amount and quality of forage produced by native vegetation. These include variation in rainfall, phenological changes in vegetation, and intensity of grazing by livestock. Nutritional quality of deer diets during times when native vegetation is lacking in quality can be increased by providing warm season food plots.

The key to increasing diet quality for deer is maximizing forage production in food plots. Based on research conducted on El Tecomate Ranch during 1992-93, it appears warm season food plots increase the protein content of deer diets when food plot forages compose 40 to 50% or more of the diet. Food plots have less of an impact on diet quality than when they compose <40% of the diet. This is a rough figure and needs to be refined.

The nutritional benefit of food plots is lost if deer "graze them out." For example, from May through June 1992 the estimated dietary protein of deer using warm season food plots on El Tecomate Ranch remained well above that of deer not

using food plots. Food plot forages that deer ate declined as deer consumed the most nutritious portions of the forage available in 12-acre food plots. Consequently, by August there was little difference in the protein content of diets between deer using food plots and deer not using food plots.

Two keys to having plenty of quality forage available in warm season food plots are to (1) plant food plots that are large enough to feed the deer herd without them being grazed out and (2) use farming techniques that maximize forage production.

Skip-row planting is one technique to increase plant survival and forage yield during late summer in low rainfall areas such as western south Texas. Planting pairs of rows spaced 3-feet apart and separating



Wyman Meinzer

these rows with 1 or 2 unplanted rows provided greater survival of lablab plants. This resulted in greater forage production during August. In addition to increasing plant survival and available forage, skip-row planting reduces seed costs.

PROFILES

New Researchers join CKWRI, Texas A&M University-Kingsville

Fred Bryant joined the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute as the new director in July 1996. Fred's interests focus on wildlife habitat management.

Felipe Chavez-Ramirez is the new avian (bird) ecologist for the Institute. He came on board in January 1996. Felipe is conducting studies on birds such as whooping cranes, hawks, shrikes, and wading birds.

Tim Ginnett arrived in June and is currently working out of the Texas A&M Center in Uvalde. His research interests focus on foraging behavior and habitat use of white-tailed deer, particularly how gender influences deer behavior and nutrition.

Did You Know...

Deer shed their antlers every year.

Many sandhill cranes do not breed until they are 6-7 years old.

Mountain lions are the largest predator in Texas.

Pronghorn antelope do not have dew claws.

Bobwhites have been introduced in Hawaii and Italy.

Texas horned lizards can shoot blood from a gland located near their eyes, which is used as a defense against predators.

David Hewitt began in July. His interests are in wildlife nutrition and ecology. Currently, he has projects on the effects of pesticides on reproduction of white-winged doves, influence of brush treatments on deer carrying capacity, and a study examining how deer can feed on plants that have toxic substances without getting sick.

Jonathan Thompson is the new waterfowl and wetlands ecologist. Jonathan currently has a study on sandhill cranes, in which he is examining their distribution and evaluating the composition and characteristics of the wintering population that occurs in south Texas. Additionally, he has projects that will ex-

amine the wintering ecology of snowy and piping plovers, and he is developing studies that will evaluate the effects of dredging operations in the intracoastal waterway.

Alan Fedynich is a research scientist for the Institute and arrived last July. His research interests include wildlife diseases, parasitology, and environmental contaminants.

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COMING EVENTS

South Texas Wildlife Conference will meet April 25th, 1997 in Cotulla, Texas. The meeting will focus on "Drought and Wildlife".

The Great Texas Birding Classic, April 19-27, 1997. This event is a competitive bird watching tournament and a celebration of Texas birds. The Coastal Bend region's official competition day will be on April 23rd. Many related events are scheduled in local communities. For more Coastal Bend information contact Kingsville Convention and Visitors Bureau, Inc.

What Do They Eat?

Although coyotes are often thought of as carnivores, which eat animals and birds, they also eat insects, fruits, berries, mesquite beans, and eggs.

Desert tortoises are known to eat prickly pear fruits.

Shoalgrass, a species of marine sea grass, is the primary food source for wintering redheads in coastal areas of south Texas.

Texas horned lizards prefer a diet of harvester ants, which are commonly called big red ants.

Management Tips

1. For managing wildlife cover, the stocking rate of cattle is more important than grazing rotation.
2. Black-bellied whistling ducks are cavity nesters that will use nest boxes placed near permanent freshwater wetlands.

Whooping Cranes

by *Felipe Chavez-Ramirez*

The whooping crane is the tallest bird in North America reaching a height of up to 5 feet. The whooping crane is also one of the most endangered birds in the world. The current wild population, as of December 1996, numbers 158 individuals. However, this is a considerable increase from an all time population low of 16 wild individuals in 1941. Since that time, whooping cranes have increased considerably thanks to research and conservation efforts conducted in the United States and Canada.

The whooping crane breeds in Wood Buffalo National Park in northern Alberta and the Northwest Territories of Canada and migrates

south in the fall to spend the winter along the Texas coast. Whooping cranes overwinter primarily on Aransas and Matagorda Island National Wildlife Refuges.

Overwintering whooping cranes prefer the salt marshes found along the Texas coast. Cranes often feed on a large variety of prey items, including blue crab, wolfberry fruit, snails, clams, and a variety of insects. Recently, research has revealed that whooping crane diets consist primarily of blue crab and wolfberry fruit, which can make up from 50 to 98% all food consumed during the winter.

Currently, there are several efforts at trying to improve the chances of whooping cranes surviving into the future. For the last 3 years, juvenile whooping cranes have been released in central Florida

in small groups. As of December 1996, there were 50 whooping cranes still alive in Florida; more birds will be released this coming spring. Another activity currently underway is a project to reintroduce a new migratory flock of whooping cranes into the wild. Scientists want to locate a breeding area in Canada and a wintering site in the southeastern United States. It is important to establish separate populations of whooping cranes to minimize the possibility that some natural or man-made disaster could significantly reduce or eliminate the only wild flock that winters in Texas.



Migratory route (yellow) and wintering area (red) of whooping cranes in Texas.



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