

A LITTLE CAT GOES A LONG WAY



Although they weigh less than a well-fed house cat, jaguarundis have the second-greatest north-to-south distribution of any wild cat in the Americas, ranging from Argentina to Arizona. Sort of. Chiricahua National Monument lists them as “documented historically” in the mountain range, and there have been other sightings in the state, but, to date, no one has ever photographed a wild jaguarundi in Arizona.

BY MATT JAFFE

THERE ARE ALL SORTS OF CATS in Arizona — from coddled condo kitties and feral Tucson toms to bobcats and cougars, the big cats of the Santa Catalina Mountains. The ringtail, sometimes called a ring-tailed cat, is actually not a cat, but jaguars and ocelots, baroquely patterned migrants from the south, wander up from Mexico into the mountain ranges of the Arizona borderlands.

Another neotropical cat ranges from Mexico to South America. It also sometimes ventures into Arizona. Which is to say, rarely. Or, possibly, never.

This would be the jaguarundi.

Like most residents of the U.S., I’ve never seen a jaguarundi in the wild. I hadn’t even heard of jaguarundis until sometime in the 1990s, when I noticed them listed on a directory of animals at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum. Based on the name, I anticipated seeing a smaller jaguar-like animal — powerfully built, with a richly spotted yellow coat. But there it was, in the enclosure: a rather odd, slinky creature, its fur a solid color, with none of the jaguar’s telltale rosettes. This animal didn’t look at all like a jaguar, and among the roughly three dozen different species of felines, the jaguarundi is truly a different breed of cat.

Conservation biologist Anthony Giordano, founder and executive director of the Society for the Preservation of Endangered Carnivores and their International Ecological Study (SPECIES), has observed jaguarundis while working in South America’s Gran Chaco region. He’s also analyzed data from visitor observations of jaguarundis at Big Bend National Park in Texas and prepared a peer-reviewed paper synthesizing existing knowledge of the animal’s ecology.

“The jaguarundi, for me, represents a big mystery,” says Giordano. “In the Western Hemisphere, it’s one of the cats we know the least about and one of the cats where there are the most misconceptions. In some areas, they’re more like ghosts.”

Giordano says few scientists have focused on jaguarundis. Basic information, such as where jaguarundis live, is incomplete. There was a tendency, he says, to assume that the animals were common and widespread in certain areas but

For decades, jaguarundis have been rumored to venture into Arizona, but so far, no one has been confirmed to have seen a wild jaguarundi in the state.

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didn't occur elsewhere. That reinforced self-fulfilling prophecies about the jaguarundi's range — a bad starting point for accurately determining the distribution of such a sketchily researched animal.

"It's actually a cat that is supposedly seen, or observed, or reported in many places where they shouldn't be," Giordano says.

That includes Arizona. Jaguarundis are frequently identified as ranging into the state, and Chiricahua National Monument lists these cats as "documented historically" in the mountain range. But no one has ever photographed a jaguarundi in the wild in Arizona. Nor have carcasses or other physical evidence been found. A native of Brooklyn, New York, Giordano lived in Tucson for three and a half years and conducted fieldwork in Arizona's "sky island" mountain ranges. During that time, he never saw any jaguarundis.

Still, he's reluctant to totally discount the possibility that jaguarundis make their way into the state.

"If someone asked me whether jaguarundis occur in Arizona now, or have occurred there naturally in the recent past, based on the data that I've really tried to dig into, I would say ... no," Giordano declares, after a long pause. "But if someone said tomorrow that they caught a jaguarundi in the sky islands, I would be like, 'Yeah, that's about right.'" He laughs, and then adds, "Like I said, they're kind of a mystery."



THE JAGUARUNDI IS CERTAINLY a curious cat. Considerably smaller than jaguars, jaguarundis top out at around 20 pounds, though many weigh even less than a well-fed house cat. Except while briefly speckled as kittens, their fur ranges from gray to reddish-brown. The head is oblong, with small, round ears set far back and a long crown that tapers straight to a barely-there snout on a flat face with no brow.

Seen in profile, the head appears streamlined, like an old Pontiac hood ornament. It's undersized for the jaguarundi's body, where already lithe contours are exaggerated by comparatively stubby legs and a skinny tail that's nearly as long as the rest of the animal. These odd proportions, combined with a sinuous movement while walking, have earned the jaguarundi the nicknames "otter cat" and "weasel cat," labels any self-respecting felid would disdain.

Puma yagouaroundi, the cat's scientific designation, contains a couple of hints about the jaguarundi's biology. *Puma* refers to the fact that the jaguarundi is actually classified as part of the same genus as mountain lions, not jaguars. And the Latin root *und* roughly translates as "wave," an allusion to the jaguarundi's distinctive body type and way of walking.

The jaguarundi's odd proportions may be related to its preferred thorn-scrub habitat, a transition zone of brushy and spiny plants between the desert and tropical forests. In this densely packed tangle of vegetation — where the jaguarundi feeds on an assortment of rodents, small reptiles and birds —

a low profile is certainly an advantage for moving freely and avoiding detection by predators.

Giordano says jaguarundis have one of the most diverse vocal repertoires of any feline their size, likely an adaptation to facilitate communication while concealed in the scrub. And they also have the second-greatest north-to-south distribution of any wild cat in the Americas, behind only mountain lions — which, in turn, happen to have the biggest range of any mammal in the Western Hemisphere, other than humans.

Arizona pushes the very northern limits of the jaguarundi's range, theoretically taking them from Patagonia, Argentina, to Patagonia, Arizona. That prospect is not as far-fetched as it might seem when you consider the jaguarundi's adaptability and the state's geography.

The Chiricahuas, along with other sky island ranges in Arizona, New Mexico and northwestern Mexico, comprise the Madrean Archipelago, part of a corridor that helps link the tropics to the Rockies. These ranges are "a world biodiversity

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hot spot," according to the Sky Island Alliance, an environmental organization dedicated to preserving this complex of uplands, deserts and grasslands where "jaguar and black bear meet, where bromeliads grow in the arms of maple trees, and spicy chiltepin pepper and sweet Arizona canyon grape grow side by side."

Within the sky islands, there are 600 species of bees and nearly 500 vertebrate species, including, according to many sources, the jaguarundi.

But in an email correspondence, Lisa Haynes, coordinator of the University of Arizona's Wild Cat Research and Conservation Center, echoes Giordano's skepticism about jaguarundis in the state. "There have been hundreds, if not thousands of unverified sightings ... but not one verified documentation," she says. "With all the trapping that has been done over decades, and now with the ubiquity of trail cameras in the landscape, it's highly unlikely that they are here with no evidence."

The record of unconfirmed jaguarundi sightings in Arizona

dates to 1938, when one of the animals was allegedly spotted in the Canelo Hills, an area between the Huachuca Mountains and the town of Patagonia. A 2009 study on neotropical cats in the U.S.-Mexico border region identified 51 sightings of jaguarundis in Arizona, including 26 Class 2 (considered credible, though unconfirmed) observations. That's actually more than three times the number of ocelot sightings in the state — although, unlike jaguarundis, three of the ocelot sightings were officially corroborated.

If, as it appears, jaguarundis don't range into Arizona, the question becomes: Why not? They're resilient creatures and not especially timid, ranging from the thorn-scrub habitat into forests and agricultural areas. They sometimes get into trouble with farmers for preying on chickens, but unlike ocelots and jaguars, jaguarundis aren't poached for their pelts.

To avoid predation and competition from their fellow cats, jaguarundis are active during the day — another reason that if they were present in Arizona, some sightings should have been verified. But even the closest documented observation of a jaguarundi was hundreds of miles south of the Arizona-Sonora border.

Dr. Howard Quigley, jaguar program executive director and puma program director for Panthera, the global wild cat conservation organization, says that when he inquired with colleagues in Mexico about the northernmost occurrence of jaguarundis in Sonora, they told him there were no recent records.

"It really surprised me," Quigley says. "That's the kind of landscape I would expect to see them in and that they would be adapted to. I spoke with a guy with the Northern Jaguar Project, where they do camera trapping all the time. But they haven't had any jaguarundis."

Quigley says that while the proposed border wall risks fragmenting the landscape for wildlife, jaguarundis are small enough that they could work their way through gaps, at least in some sections of the existing barrier. "We aren't out there all the time," he says. "They could slip across the border and be living in Arizona for a decade, and we wouldn't necessarily know it. On the other hand, I would think they would show up sooner or later. But everyone loves the romantic notion that there may be this mysterious animal out there. Whether it's a sasquatch or a jaguarundi."



MY OWN SEARCH FOR THE JAGUARUNDI, more virtual than real, eventually leads to the unlikely convergence of sasquatches and jaguarundis. Online, I find a grainy 2013 video shot by four surveillance cameras operated by the late Mitchell Waite, a researcher seeking to capture footage of Arizona's own Bigfoot — the legendary Mogollon Monster. Instead, one night Waite recorded what he concluded was a jaguarundi.

While speaking by phone with Giordano, I send him the



A jaguarundi perches on a tree trunk. Despite their name, jaguarundis are in the same genus as mountain lions, not jaguars.

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link and ask whether the animal in the Mogollon Rim video might, in fact, be a jaguarundi.

He turns off Waite's narration and asks me not to say anything so he can concentrate on the images. Giordano is mostly silent through the two-and-a-half-minute video: "Here we go. ... Huh. ... Hmm." He stays quiet through the rest of the footage before declaring, "The resolution is horrible, of course. But you look at the body, you look at the size, you look at the build. And the fact that it's at night is a trigger that this is unlikely to be a jaguarundi. My idea on what the animal could be is that it looks like ... a ringtail."

Jaguarundi or no jaguarundi, the video's comments section is revealing. A number of posters have never heard of jaguarundis, while for others, the notion of these cats in Arizona is no surprise at all. Someone says they spotted a jaguarundi near their cabin at the base of the Mogollon Rim, while another writes, "I don't know why you call them rare; they can be seen up north in Arizona. I'm 46 years old, and I've seen them all my life when I'm hunting [and] watch them in the daylight, families of them all around Northern Arizona."

Giordano says such reactions are just part of the mystery of jaguarundis. While he was at Texas Tech University, Giordano says, graduate students would come to him with what seemed to be credible observations of jaguarundis in very unlikely places. Jaguarundi sightings are "a thing," he says, with elements of Bigfoot. But, of course, these cats are real.

"I'm constantly wanting to be in their heads. Trying to figure out what they're doing," he says. "There's something definitely strange about them. You're looking at a jaguarundi and can't help but think, *Yeah, it's a cat, and very cat-like. But ... other. Something else.*"