

A Guide to Living with Wild Cats¹

Venetia S. Briggs-Gonzalez, Rebecca G. Harvey, Frank J. Mazzotti, and William M. Giuliano²



Figure 1. Jaguar (*Panthera onca*) www.tonyrath.com
Credits: © Tony Rath Photography, all rights reserved.

Sharing the Landscape

Belize is home to five species of wild cats. They live mainly in forests and wetlands, and hunt animals such as paca (gibnut), coatimundi, deer, peccary, birds, reptiles, and small rodents. When farms and villages are next to forests, people and wild cats live side-by-side. In the New River area of Orange Walk District, the Lamanai Field Research

Center and University of Florida are studying cats using “camera traps” placed in a variety of locations on private lands. This research suggests that more wild cats live near farms than people are aware of.

Considering the number of wild cats living near villages, attacks on livestock and people are rare in Belize. However, conflicts between people and cats sometimes occur when cats lack food, water and habitat, when livestock is threatened, or when people are unaware of the benefits to living with cats.

Cats of Belize

Jaguar

average 4.25 ft. long, 160 lbs.

The **jaguar** (locally known as *tiger*) is the largest cat in the Americas and a national icon in Belize. Jaguars have large home ranges and hunt many different animals, particularly large animals such as deer and peccary. They usually hunt at night but are sometimes active during the day. The jaguar has a compact body with a broad head. Their coats are usually yellow and tan with black rose-shaped spots. Black jaguars also exist but are rare in Belize.

1. This document is WEC314, one of a series of the Department of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date October 2011. Revised June 2018 and November 2024. Visit the EDIS website at <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu> for the currently supported version of this publication.
2. Venetia S. Briggs-Gonzalez, research ecologist; Rebecca G. Harvey, environmental education coordinator; Frank J. Mazzotti, professor, Fort Lauderdale Research and Education Center; and William M. Giuliano, professor and extension specialist, Department of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation, UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) is an Equal Opportunity Institution authorized to provide research, educational information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function with non-discrimination with respect to race, creed, color, religion, age, disability, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, national origin, political opinions or affiliations. For more information on obtaining other UF/IFAS Extension publications, contact your county's UF/IFAS Extension office. U.S. Department of Agriculture, UF/IFAS Extension Service, University of Florida, IFAS, Florida A & M University Cooperative Extension Program, and Boards of County Commissioners Cooperating. Andra Johnson, dean for UF/IFAS Extension.

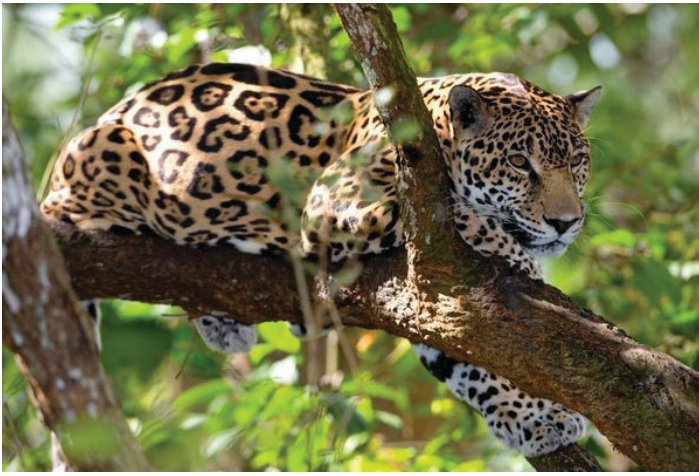


Figure 2. Jaguar (*Panthera onca*) www.tonyrath.com
Credits: © Tony Rath Photography, all rights reserved.

Puma

average 3.25 ft. long, 100 lbs.

The **puma** (*yellow cat, red tiger, panther, cougar, mountain lion*) lives in similar areas to jaguars but is more wide-spread. Pumas tend to hunt at dusk and dawn. They prefer medium-sized prey (paca, raccoon, armadillo, etc.) but are capable of hunting large animals. Pumas are big cats with more slender heads than jaguars, and longer back legs than front legs. Adults' coats are reddish-yellow to tan with no spots.



Figure 3. Puma (*Puma concolor*)
Credits: Francois Savigny / NPL / Minden Pictures

Jaguarundi

average 2.3 ft. long, 15 lbs.

Jaguarundis (*halari*) are small, little-known cats that are often mistaken for tayras or bushdogs. They are most active during the day and hunt birds, lizards, and small mammals. Their bodies are long and slender and their coats are either grayish-black or red.



Figure 4. Jaguarundi (*Puma yagouaroundii*)
Credits: Lamanai Field Research Center

Ocelot

average 2.5 ft. long, 22 lbs.

The **ocelot** (*tigrillo, tiger cat*) is the only medium-sized wild cat in the Americas. Ocelots live in a variety of habitats and hunt small, medium, and occasionally large animals. They are active both day and night. The ocelot has a sturdy body with distinct spots and stripes. It is often mistaken for a young jaguar, but its face has stripes instead of spots.



Figure 5. Jaguarundi (*Puma yagouaroundii*) www.tonyrath.com
Credits: © Tony Rath Photography, all rights reserved.



Figure 6. Ocelot (*Leopardus pardalis*) www.tonyrath.com
Credits: © Tony Rath Photography, all rights reserved.

Margay

average 2 ft. long, 8 lbs.

Margays (also *tigrillo*, *tiger cat*) are the smallest of the wild cats. They live in trees, are only active at night, and are rarely seen. They eat small animals, birds, insects, and fruits. Margays have similar spot patterns to ocelots but are much smaller and have long tails and very large eyes. They are often mistaken for jaguar cubs.



Figure 7. Margay (*Leopardus wiedii*) www.tonyrath.com
Credits: © Tony Rath Photography, all rights reserved.

Cats, Communities, and Conservation

The presence of predators such as wild cats is a sign of a healthy environment. By protecting cats, we protect the ecosystems that support many other animals, plants, and people. Also, having wild cats around can help reduce crop damage by reducing populations of animals such as coatis and peccaries. Yet cat populations in Belize are in decline because of habitat loss, illegal sale as pets and body

parts, hunting of their prey by humans, and conflicts with landowners usually over livestock.

When cats have enough land and food, and when people's livelihoods are secure, communities and cats can live together with minimal conflict. In fact, living with wild cats can provide economic rewards. For example, the Lamanai Field Research Center and University of Florida have involved local people in a community-based cat conservation project that values the presence of live cats on private lands. Presence of cats within a healthy ecosystem can attract ecotourists, benefitting lodges and tour guides, private landowners, the community, and the national economy.

Keeping Livestock Safe

Wild cats do not usually hunt livestock, but they may do so if they are old or injured or if there are not enough wild animals for them to hunt. Farmers who are concerned about cats may take steps to avoid problems:

- Keep livestock a safe distance from forests.
- Fence livestock away from streams and ponds and use troughs to water livestock.
- Rotate animals between pastures so cats do not become accustomed to finding them in one spot.
- Bring young and small animals into pens at night, preferably near areas where people live. Also keep dogs from wandering into forests at night.
- Breed livestock seasonally to control and protect young.
- Use donkeys and other guard animals in pastures.
- Plant crops away from livestock to attract wild prey. Jaguars and pumas visit corn and bean fields more than livestock pastures.
- Do not shoot at a wild cat. An injured cat is more likely to hunt livestock.

If you are concerned about a wild cat in your area or for more information, contact:

FOREST DEPARTMENT

Wildlife Officer

Ministry of Natural Resources and the Environment

Forest Drive, Belmopan, Belize

Tel: 011-501-802-1524 or 802-2079

Fax: 011-501-822-1523

Email: secretary@forest.gov.bz

Home - [Forest Department of Belize](#)

or

LAMANAI FIELD RESEARCH CENTER

Indian Church Village

Orange Walk, Belize

Tel: 011-501-670-7172

Email: info@lamanai.org

<https://www.lamanai.org>

<https://crocdoc.ifas.ufl.edu/projects/belizecats/>