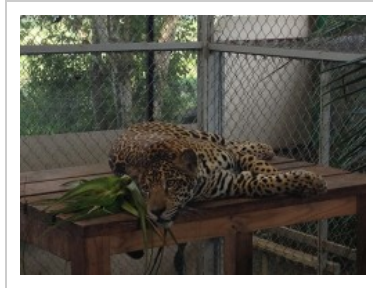




News

FIONA IN FREE-FALL: PANAMA'S DISAPPEARING JAGUARS

July 22, 2016



What made this rescue so unique was the fact that Fiona arrived as a motherless infant, one of the last of a dying species

Like a foghorn, the sound of the phone ringing at midnight cut through the muggy night air. Zoologist Néstor Correa, his wife Yíscel and the rest of the team had been feverishly preparing to celebrate International Sloth Day on the morning of October 18, 2014, and he craved a good night's sleep.

"We have something for you," the vet on the phone said "An ocelot. A baby ocelot."

The vet texted him a photograph. One glance, and Néstor bolted from the bed. Minutes later, he and Yíscel, a fellow wildlife expert, were speeding through the darkness, crossing the rickety, one-lane bridge across the main tributary of the

Panama Canal from the town of Gamboa toward the city, a half an hour away.

To the untrained eye, it was an easy mistake to make: an ocelot cub boasts fine facial features. Crisp, black streaks of fur shoot from each eye back over its forehead. This baby was not an ocelot.

Their hearts sank at the sight of the jaguar cub. What was she, five days old? A week? Her body the size of a large man's shoe, she clung clumsily to tendrils of life on the vet's metallic table. They took in the yawning hole in her tiny abdomen, bite marks riddling her chest and limp limbs, the skin beneath her fur, slick with blood, popping like bubble wrap as air crept beneath it.

After calling another vet, Dr. Julio Reyes, the vet who called Néstor explained that an unnamed man had dropped the animal off. Before leaving, the guy said that he bought the injured cub from poachers in eastern Panama's Bayano region. They had killed her mother with a lead-core bullet and their hunting dogs ravaged the cub. The poachers wanted \$1,000, but the man tried to finagle it for free. In the end, they took the \$300 he had in his wallet and left, vanishing just as the cub's savior did after dropping her off.

Dr. Reyes began the surgery at 2 AM. When the procedure ended an hour-and-a-half later, the cub was still alive, though barely. For two days, Dr. Reyes cared for her at his own private practice, changing the baby-pink mesh dressings on her wounds. They all prayed she wouldn't die. By day three she showed signs of improvement, enough so that she was deemed ready to go home with Néstor and Yíscel. Dr. Reyes named her Fiona.

Usually torrents of rain drench the earth every summer afternoon in this humid, tropical country, but today the skies are parched and give up nothing. It's almost a year after Fiona's rescue, and I am seated opposite Néstor at a large

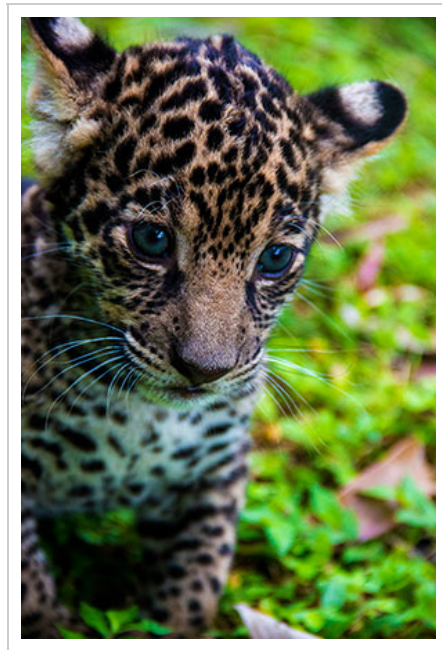
wooden table in the dining room of a two-story wooden villa from the last century, built by the Americans who ran the canal and lived here until its management was turned over to Panama in 2000. Néstor, Yiscel, their son, and three other naturalists live here, devoted to a cause for which they seek no payment.

After amassing more than 15 years of training and experience, Néstor founded the non-profit *Asociación Panamericana Para la Conservación* (APPC) in 2005 to fill a void in this Central American country teeming with wildlife—there wasn't a single rescue center in Panama for orphaned, abandoned and injured animals. Opening the Gamboa Wildlife Center, just down the road from the house and under the management of APPC, was a dream long in the making.

"I've rescued jaguars a couple of times over the last 15 years, but this was a very special case," Néstor says, speaking at a gallop. His black hair is swept back into a ponytail that hangs down his back and his wide eyes plainly reveal his passion for the work he is doing.

What made this rescue so unique was the fact that Fiona arrived as a motherless infant, one of the last of a dying species. "The situation for jaguar populations in Panama is critical. People don't really get it. They think it's not such a big deal. They think that there are more important things, like the current Panama Canal expansion or the economy."

He leans back, raising his hands in exasperation. "They don't understand that in ten years, if we continue at this rate, we are going to exterminate the jaguar."



Fiona at three weeks of age. (Photos courtesy of Eduardo Estrada, *Wildlife Photography*, 2014).

The largest cat in the Americas, *Panthera onca*, sits at the top of the food chain, a victim to no predator. The jaguar is elusive, an introvert, slinking through the rainforest seldom seen, seldom heard, and feared by man and beast alike. Despite the jaguar's lofty status in the wild, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature considers the animal to be "near threatened."

Néstor and Yiscel's new houseguest was enormously endearing, bounding around the house, a playful kitten. British volunteer, Lynne Hawksworth, one of APPC's Board members with over 30 years' experience working with big cats, became Fiona's *de facto* mother, and Niki, a young volunteer from Germany, quickly formed a sisterly bond with the cub.

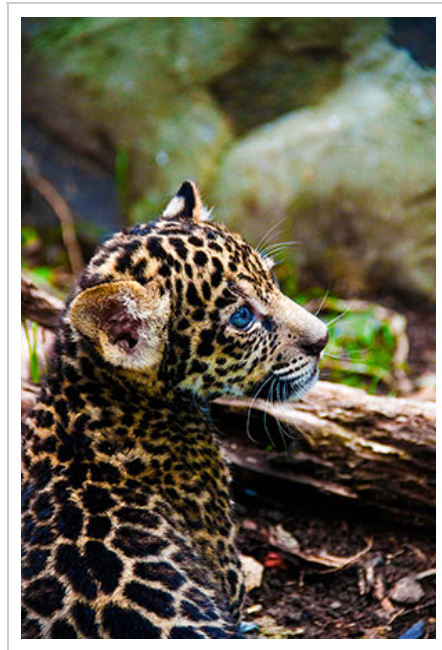
Although Fiona was not trying to harm her human family, says Néstor, by three months, she had all the equipment needed to kill them. He decided to give Fiona her own room on the other side of the house, where she lived for more than four months. As she matured, so did her jaguar instincts. She flexed her scythe-like claws and toyed with the furniture, scratching into the pine clapboard walls of her room. The family continued to enter to feed and play with her, but the situation was becoming tenuous. Fiona needed a larger, more secure place to roam freely.

When Fiona was four-and-a-half months old, about the size of an adult golden retriever Néstor made a mistake while feeding her. He placed Fiona's bowl by the door after entering the room and began to clean up while she lapped up the milk, aiming to leave the room while she was still feeding. As he approached her bowl, Fiona sprung up to a higher position from which to attack him. She leapt within seconds and wrestled aggressively with him. With his gloved right hand, Néstor manhandled her into her wire kennel and slammed the door shut with his foot. The struggle from leap to lock-up lasted almost 30 minutes. Fiona hung her head meekly. Shaken, Néstor vowed that none of his team was going to risk interacting that closely with Fiona again. She had to move.

APPC is a small organization doing solitary, important work, and to increase its influence, Néstor has teamed up with several groups with similar philosophies. One is Sea World/Busch Gardens Parks in the U.S., whose conservation fund has assisted APPC since 2006, providing technical and financial support for conservation groups that share APPC's mission. Rob Yordi is the Grants Administrator for the Fund and is extremely impressed with the work that APPC is doing in conservation and rescue.

When Néstor called him in February 2015 for assistance in constructing a larger enclosure for the growing jaguar cub, Rob needed no convincing, and he and his team headed down to Panama. Néstor arranged the purchase of all the materials and enrichments, and supervised the construction in a few short weeks of the temporary, 38 square meter enclosure inside the Gamboa Wildlife Center where Fiona is still housed today. Néstor is satisfied that Fiona is comfortable and safe in her new home, and Rob agrees. "It comes down to taking care of Fiona," he says. "That's the most important thing. We are all focusing on what's best for her."

Having had a wealth of experience in conservation efforts with big cats over the years, both Néstor and Rob knew the enclosure could not be a permanent home for Fiona. Together with Rob's group, Néstor and his team began to consider long-term solutions for where she was going to be housed.



Fiona at three weeks of age. (Photos courtesy of Eduardo Estrada, *Wildlife Photography*, 2014).

The second group that APPC has partnered with is called Yaguará Panamá, a nonprofit organization devoted to the preservation of endangered species like *Panthera onca* in Panama and nearby Costa Rica. The group is the brainchild of a well-known Panamanian biologist Néstor playfully calls “The Jaguar Man,” Ricardo Moreno, a research associate at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute in Panama. For all intents and purposes, he is a solo act.

The public face of jaguar conservation in Panama bounded into the room dressed for a hike through the rainforest. Cap jammed firmly in place, wearing colorful string wristbands and a playful grin, he introduced himself as Ric. There is nobody else in Panama who is doing as much to try to save the jaguar as Ricardo Moreno. He is always on the move, tracking the big cats through the rainforest in the mountains of Darién province (in eastern Panama, near the border with Colombia), or in the bush near the beaches of Bocas del Toro in the north. Sitting at a dinner table exchanging pleasantries is not the man’s style.

Ricardo’s assessment of the state of jaguar populations in Panama is curt. “Most people want to know the [‘rosy’] story. But, it’s a very ‘black’ story. It’s very bad.”

Ricardo and his colleagues are working on a study to accurately estimate jaguar numbers using camera-traps secured to trees as the principal method of counting the animals. The cameras silently snap digital photos throughout the day and night when infrared and motion sensors detect heat or movement, respectively. While the numbers for the entire country are not yet in, Ricardo now has good data for specific parts of the country, including Darien Province, the site of the biggest camera-trapping program. Despite its reputation as one of Panama’s remaining wild frontiers, jaguar density in this province on Panama’s border with Colombia is very low, approximately one to two animals per hundred thousand hectares. In comparison, areas of Venezuela, Guatemala and Belize boast six to 10 animals over the same range. “In the last 25 years,” says Ricardo, “about 230 jaguars have officially been killed in Panama, but I [believe] it’s more than that—it could be 500.

"The data show that nine to 10 jaguars are killed every year, but we have had 16 killed so far this year [October 2015]. I know that at the end of the year, the number could be 18 or 20."

In the face of Ricardo's alarming figures, an obvious question arises: why has the Panama jaguar population plummeted? A key reason is that human progress encroaches upon animal habitats as urban areas expand, forcing jaguars and other wildlife into shrinking areas of rainforest.

The Pirre Mountain Range in Darién Province is situated near the center of a virtual conduit of fragmented, forested regions connecting populations of large cats from Argentina in the south to Mexico in the north. Known popularly as the Jaguar Corridor, one can follow the movement of their genes along this pathway. Jaguars (mainly young males) move across broad areas of land, mating and producing offspring that mature and continue to move, spreading genetic diversity throughout the Americas.

Local communities adjacent to once recognized jaguar habitats engage in agriculture and cattle ranching, clearing large swaths of rainforest to plant their crops and allow their cattle to graze. With their habitat fragmented, jaguars are isolated, cut off from others and at risk of dying when they attempt to cross from one patch to another.

Grazing livestock often prove to be incredibly tempting for a jaguar on the hunt. With their livelihood under threat, farmers and ranchers load their rifles and deal with the problem of jaguar attacks directly. Ricardo spoke with one rancher in the Atlantic coastal area of Chagres who said to him: "We don't like the jaguar. We want to kill all of them. I don't know why God created those animals. We need to kill them all." With the help of nefarious poachers who are hungry for jaguar pelt, claws, and teeth to hawk, the jaguars are trapped, both physically and figuratively.

Farmers fear not only for their livestock, but also for their own lives and those of their families, despite reports, according to Ricardo, of only one killing of a human by a jaguar in Panama that occurred decades ago. Ricardo spends an inordinate amount of time visiting these communities, speaking with farmers at length, gaining their trust, working with them on ways to avoid killing the jaguars that roam among their farms.

When farmers call him after spotting a jaguar, imploring him to take the animal far away, Ricardo refuses. "Jaguars have lived with humans for [thousands] of years," he tells them. "[They] can continue to live with them now."

There are ways to encourage this. Ricardo emphasizes that education is the key to halting the killing of jaguars. Breeding programs, of which there are currently none in Panama, are good for maintaining the genes of a jaguar line. But after millions of dollars have been invested in the program and the jaguars are released into the same hostile environment, poachers will consider them easy target practice. So, Ricardo uses incentives instead.

He has started a program to pay each farmer \$20 for every photograph of a jaguar captured by a camera-trap on his land. In these rural communities, \$20 buys a week's worth of staple foods that families rely on for survival. With the minimum monthly wage in Panama sitting at around US\$250, this extra money means a great deal to such families. This year, Ricardo will try to capture a known female jaguar with the help of a farmer and, for the first time, place a GPS radio collar around her neck before releasing her back into the rainforest. Ricardo has told the farmer and his family to name the animal. "This is your jaguar," he told them. "I know that right now, [this farmer] is talking with all his neighbors asking them to please not kill this cat." He encourages the farmers to manage their cattle better and to stop killing peccaries and tapirs, which are the principal prey for the jaguars.

Ricardo's mantra is now this: *Help the people, because if we help the people, we know those people are going to help the jaguar.*

Néstor chimes in: "Right now is when we can save the jaguar. Once the jaguar population falls to less than 100 individuals, this bloodline—the Panamanian jaguar—will disappear. That's the biggest concern." He leans in and whispers. "But people don't get it."

Fiona is about a year old when I meet her, housed in her airy, fenced-in enclosure at the Gamboa Wildlife Center. She lies upon a sturdy wooden table, appearing fully-grown to the casual observer, yet still only a cub. Visitors come and go like phantoms, snapping pictures of her with their iPhones, taking videos and selfies. She is completely used to humans now. She has never developed the fear of humans that her mother would have taught her in her first two years of life.

Suddenly, a door slams, and Fiona starts, tensing in a moment the strong muscles in her growing body. Her ever-watchful eyes blink twice as she rolls from her side onto her haunches. Does she remember the clap of the gunshot that killed her mother when she was only a few days old? She's the lucky one. That sound isn't a death knell, and she may live in captivity to the ripe old age of 24 years as opposed to 16 to 18 years in the rainforests of Bayano. She won't have to journey along the treacherous rainforest corridor to spread her genes to future generations of jaguars. She'll probably experience motherhood in a controlled environment, with none of the external associated dangers to her cubs or herself. Despite this assured future, nobody yet knows where her permanent home will be.

As she lowers herself down onto the wooden table, resting on her side, she's safe from hunters and hunger, but she is also out of place. Those who have worked to bring her here know that in an ideal world, she would be free, out where her blood spilled almost a year prior, creeping through the brush of a Panamanian rainforest.

Photo caption:

Photo right: Fiona at one year of age (October 2015) (Photo: Tafadzwa Kasambira)

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