



Camera snaps jaguar photos below border

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COURTESY OF SKY ISLAND ALLIANCE

This northern jaguar was photographed in early January by a remote camera in Sonora, about 30 miles south of the U.S.-Mexican border. A conservation group has discovered at least one jaguar in northern Sonora, about 30 miles south of the Arizona border, the group reported Monday.

The Sky Island Alliance's remote cameras caught a jaguar in the same spot in two photographs taken eight days apart in early January, said Sergio Avila, an alliance biologist in Tucson. It's not known if the photos were of the same animal, because they showed different sides. The sex of neither photo subjects is known, Avila said. Avila said he saw the photos for the first time over the weekend at the home of Carlos Elias, a northern Sonora rancher on whose land the photos were taken.

Working in the northern Mexico area for five years, the group has also documented jaguar tracks and evidence of jaguar kills there. The photographs come a year after the United States' last known wild jaguar, Macho B, was captured in a Southern Arizona canyon near the Mexican border. Macho B was fitted with a radio collar, released, recaptured after slowing down and then euthanized March 2, 2009 - all within a 12-day period.

Typically, the central focus of northern Sonora jaguars has been on the Northern Jaguar Preserve, about 90 miles south of where the latest jaguar sightings occurred. "Northern jaguars are a reality, and they want to stay," Avila said. "Jaguars don't recognize political boundaries. They choose robust prey populations, open space and safe corridors. "This is just the beginning" of the group's efforts to recover what he believes to be a viable, long-term jaguar population in northern Sonora and Southern Arizona, Avila said.

The latest jaguar photos were taken in oak woodland riverfront habitat, the same type of habitat where four male jaguars have been spotted in the Sky Islands of Arizona and New Mexico since 1996, he said.

An Arizona State University biologist who has written about jaguars, however, downplayed the biological significance of this discovery. A reproducing female is needed to show that a viable population exists, said David Brown. "There's nothing unusual about a jaguar discovered in oak woodlands - kind of neat, but nothing surprising," said Brown, co-author of the 2001 book "Borderlands Jaguars." "My guess is it's just another male, expanding out from that core area. I think it's a neat observation and a great discovery, but biologically it doesn't mean that much."

The 70,000-square-mile Sky Islands region of Southeastern Arizona, southwestern New Mexico, and northwestern Mexico is globally important because of its rich diversity of species and habitats, and the presence of rare species such as the jaguar and the Mexican wolf, the alliance said. Sky Islands are forested ranges separated by expanses of desert and grasslands.

Even if this latest discovery is a solitary male, the discovery is significant because researchers continue to find jaguars in the Sky Islands along the U.S.-Mexican border, Avila said. It proves this is healthy habitat, containing healthy prey populations with opportunities for jaguar recovery, Avila said. "The jaguars are telling us what good habitat looks like - what we should continue to protect," he said.

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