



Jaguar

Jaguars (*Panthera onca*) are the largest cats in the Western Hemisphere. Larger and stockier than their cousins, they've been called a leopard on steroids.

The background of their coat is tawny-yellow, lightened to white on the throat and belly. They're marked with small spots on the head and neck, and dark open-ring rosettes on the sides and flanks. The rosettes on the jaguar and leopard are almost identical, but the jaguars have spots inside the rosettes, where the leopards have none. The spots along a jaguar's back often merge into a solid line. Melanistic jaguars have been observed in South America with heavily pigmented coats that are almost black. One albino cat, with pink eyes and white claws, has also been observed.

The jaguar's robust stature and legendary strength have given it the reputation of being a large cat, but in reality males rarely reach three hundred pounds and average 175 to 200 pounds. The largest are found in the Pantanal region of Brazil. Females are somewhat smaller, averaging 70 to 90 pounds.

Whereas most large cats kill their prey with a bite to the throat or neck, Jaguars kill their prey with a bite to the temporal bones of the skull resulting in instant death. The South American Indians coined the name *yaguara*, which means "a beast that kills with one bound."

The primary habitats of the jaguar include the dense tropical rain forests and swampy grasslands of Central and South America. They have occasionally been found above 8,000 feet. In the damp forest habitat, jaguars like to roam close to rivers, streams and lakes, and are strong swimmers. Like the leopard, it also frequents open country, especially in the most northerly and southerly parts of its range. Their distribution ranges from northern Mexico (and now southern Arizona!) to south central Argentina.

Since the early 1970's the jaguar has been on the list of totally protected animals in most South American countries. Belize has the world's only park, opened in 1984, dedicated to the preservation of the jaguar.

Throughout South and Central America, vast areas of wilderness are being cleared for agriculture and cattle ranching. Human encroachment permanently alters the eco-system by cutting down forests and disrupting the normal hunting and traveling patterns that resident cats have established. As more areas open up for development, the jaguar continues in direct competition for its food. Turtles, tortoises, monkeys capybara and fish that they normally feed on, are captured and sold for their meat. The caiman population, also a jaguar staple, has been decimated to satisfy the skin trade. The competition for food and habitat looks as a larger threat to jaguars than the demand for their skins. Their numbers are diminishing, even though they're formidable predators, often taking animals as large as peccaries and tapirs.

Jaguars have no established breeding season, with reproduction taking place any time during the year. A series of roaring "calls" and urinary scent marking by both sexes help amorous males locate receptive females during estrous. After mating, the pair separates, with the female providing all parenting for the offspring.

Litters average one to four cubs, born blind, with each weighing two to two and a half pounds, after a gestation period of 95 to 105 days. The cubs generally remain in the den where they were born for up to six months. The coat of the cub is wooly with spots much like the adult pattern, although the background color on the adult is more subdued.

The cubs are weaned by the age of three months, when they begin to accompany their mother on hunts. They ultimately remain with her for up to two years, after which they leave to establish territories of their own. The average life expectancy for a jaguar in the wild is 15 to 20 years, with captive individuals often exceeding 25 years.