

STALKING WILD CATS

HEAR JAGUARS ROAR IN COCKSCOMB BASIN

Once upon a time in the Cockscomb Basin, poachers hunted the powerful jaguars, loggers cut the mahogany trees, and hurricanes toppled the old-growth canopy.

Just 20 years later, the jaguars rule, the trees grow dense, and the only threat that remains is from hurricanes. Today, the five wild cats of Belize — jaguars, jaguarundis, margays, ocelots, and pumas — all thrive under the protection of Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary, established in 1986 as the world's first jaguar preserve and now home to the world's largest concentration of wild cats.

Nature-lovers also thrive at Cockscomb Basin — a 128,000-acre bowl of pristine rainforest, winding rivers, and scenic waterfalls in Stann Creek District — surrounded by mountain ridges and the looming 3,675-foot Victoria Peak. People flock here to hike, camp, kayak, canoe, tube, and swim. The Belize Audubon Society manages the sanctuary, with a visitor center, Maya craft shop, and accommodations just off Southern Highway at Maya Centre.

Well-marked hiking trails lead children, adults, and serious naturalists throughout the terrain. Some paths take visitors on casual strolls along riverbanks. Some pose more muscular challenges. One dry-season route dares hearty hikers to conquer Victoria Peak, a two-day trek finished by climbing up on all fours. Get a permit and take a guide.

The trails reward visitors with breathtaking views across the basin, rare bird sightings, and a chance to meet diverse Belizean wildlife. While evidence of jaguars abounds, including their ominous roars, humans rarely get to see these masters of stealth. To survive, they rely on seeing, but not being seen.

Easily seen are the tropical birds that animate the basin with song and color. Watchers have recorded 290 species, including the scarlet macaw, king vulture, great curassow, and keel billed toucan. The Baird's tapir, Belize's national animal, roams here as Central America's largest terrestrial mammal, weighing up to 600 pounds. Indigenous black howler monkeys, driven out of the basin in the 1960s, enjoyed a comeback due to conservation in the 1990s.

Other mammals at home in the basin include the tayra (like a weasel), otter, coati, kinkajou, brocket deer, and peccary. The sanctuary also protects reptiles, amphibians, orchids, air plants, climbing vines, and giant ferns. Common trees include the banak, negrito, quamwood, yemeri, cohune palm, mahogany, and ceiba, with a forest canopy from 40 to 120 feet.

But the stars of Cockscomb Basin remain the five wild cats of Belize, each of which employs unique tactics to catch its diet of small mammals, birds, reptiles, fish, and fruit, but not people.

Jaguar. The name means "killer that overcomes its prey in a single bound." When a jaguar catches an animal, its powerful jaw clamps down, and its teeth pierce the skull of its quarry. Jaguars pursue almost any prey, but favor peccary (wild pig) and capybara (large rodent). An estimated 80 resident jaguars — solitary and still endangered — prowl the Cockscomb Basin. Third largest of the cats, adult males reach seven feet and weigh 250 to 400 pounds. Often confused with leopards, jaguars have spots inside their rosettes. They sometimes appear solid black, although spots are still visible. Rarely seen outside the Belize Zoo, jaguars prowl rainforests, savannas, and swamps mostly at night, with nocturnal vision six times better than that of humans. They roar, deposit feces, and leave scratches to mark their territory. In captivity, they live 20 years; in the wild, 11 to 12 years.

Jaguarundi. They travel and hunt in pairs or alone. Their long slender bodies, short legs, small flat heads, and otter-like tails make them look like weasels. Adults weigh six to 20 pounds, stand 10 to 14 inches at the shoulder, and reach 35 to 55 inches long. They come black, brownish-gray, or red — darker in rainforests such as the Cockscomb Basin; paler in dry environments. Found mainly in the lowlands, highly adaptable jaguarundis occupy diverse environments. After gestation periods of 70 to 75 days, females

produce litters of one to four kittens. In captivity, jaguarundis live up to 15 years.

Margay. Its ability to rotate its hind legs 180° makes it the cat best adapted for trees. It can run down head first like a squirrel, then hang from a branch by one paw. Margays wander through the shade of coffee plantations, cocoa farms, and forests such as Cockscomb Basin. Their coats have tawny background patterns with black-ringed rosettes and elongated blotches. Weighing nine to 20 pounds, their large eyes help with night vision. After a three-month gestation, females bear only one kitten and reproduce only once in two years. Since 50 percent of kittens die, the outlook for margays may be grim. Only 64 margays remain worldwide, according to the International Species Information Service. In captivity, they can live 20 years.

Ocelot. Once hunted for their pelts, ocelots became fur coats that sold for US\$40,000 in the 1980s. More than 200,000 of the beautiful cats died each year, before legislation restrained the trade. Spots have borders of black, with lighter colors in the center and backgrounds of off-white, tawny yellow, or gray. Territorial and solitary, they prowl diverse habitats, including rainforests and riverbanks like those in Cockscomb Basin, but never open country. They weight 17 to 24 pounds, stand 16 to 20 inches tall, and reach 48 to 64 inches long. Females produce litters of just one or two kittens after 79 to 85 days of gestation. With deforestation outside of Belize, the survival of this beautiful species may prove difficult. In captivity, ocelots can live more than 20 years; in the wild, seven to 10 years.

Puma. Agile pumas — also called cougars or red tigers — can jump as high as 18 feet up into a tree. Although they can swim, they avoid the water. Acute senses of sight and hearing compensate for a poor sense of smell. Solitary pumas thrive in swamps and forests, such as those at Cockscomb Basin. Evidence of their presence includes vocalizations, feces, and scratch marks. This fierce killer stalks its prey quietly before pouncing onto its victim's back, holding on with its claws, and biting into its neck. Among the largest cats, pumas weight 75 to 250 pounds, stand 23 to 28 inches tall, and reach 59 to 108 inches long. In captivity they can live over 20 years; in the wild, eight to 10 years.

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