

# The last jaguar

By STEVE SINCLAIR/Valley Morning Star | Posted: Monday, June 23, 2008 12:00 am

As ranch hands measured the immense cat Reynaldo Ramirez had just shot on San Jose Ranch in 1946 near Olmito, little did they realize they had witnessed the passing of an era.

The 7-foot-long, 200-pound feline was the last jaguar documented in the Rio Grande Valley.

Two years later, in 1948, along Santa Gertrudis Creek near Kingsville, a second jaguar was killed not far from Highway 77. And with it, the jaguar was exterminated from Texas.

The last killing of a jaguar in the United States took place in 1949 in Arizona.

"I hate to see the loss of any wildlife species in Texas, especially a beautiful icon like the jaguar," lamented Michael Tewes, with the Cesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute at Texas A&M University-Kingsville. Tewes has studied wild cats of Texas for a quarter of a century.

"Jaguars historically ranged from the Pineywoods of East Texas to the Hill Country," he said.

"There's no indication they were numerous in Texas," Tewes said. "Reports from early settlers were that they were occasional."

He said encounters with jaguars usually took place along river corridors where the first settlements in Texas popped up.

The world's third-largest cat behind only the tiger and lion, jaguars today range from northern Mexico to South America. According to one estimate, 15,000 jaguars remain in the wild including about 500 in Mexico. The Jaguar Species Survival Plan reports that the population is declining.

The March 1946 issue of *Texas Game and Fish* carried an account of the final moments of the last jaguar in the Valley.

This particular cat had been raiding area ranches where it killed and ate yearling calves.



## The last jaguar

The inscription on this photograph reads: "Tiger cat. 7 ½ foot long. Weight 200 pounds. Caught Jan. 30, 1946. Wright photo. San Benito, Texas." The photo, provided by former Rio Hondo Mayor Alex Chavez, was displayed for many years at the

"For several weeks the jaguar went his nefarious way. Then he made a fatal mistake. He left tracks in the dense brush of the San Jose ranch," Charles G. Jones wrote in the magazine article.

"In no time all the hounds picked up the jaguar's trail. The chase was on. Ranch hands were stationed with rifles and shotguns on open spots where the jaguar might appear in his maddened efforts to lose the closely pursuing hounds.

"Reynaldo Ramirez was stationed at one open spot. He was armed with a shotgun. Ramirez was a bit startled when the jaguar came bounding out of the brush just a few feet from where he was standing," according to the magazine account.

"He fired a load of buckshot at the big animal. The load went wild. The jaguar charged toward Ramirez. A hound cut across the open field and closed in on the infuriated jaguar. A mighty sweep of the paw and the hound was ripped apart.

"The jaguar continued his charge toward Ramirez who fired another load of buckshot at the snarling beast. All but one of the buckshot missed the jaguar. That one piece of lead struck the jaguar in the neck just below the head," according to the article.

"The animal slowed his charge to brush away the sting in his neck. Ramirez pumped six more loads of buckshot into the jaguar. This time every load went home," the article said.

The cat was dead but not before it had killed 28 yearling calves over a three-week period.

Ranch hands reported there were two other jaguars in the area and were determined to hunt them down also, but those two cats were never found.

"The reason jaguars no longer live in Texas are the changes made to their habitats," noted Linda Laack of Environmental Defense. She studied Valley cats for nearly 20 years and worked with the ocelot program as a biologist at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge.

Tewes rattled off other reasons jaguars have disappeared from the Valley.

"Intolerance by landowners for large cats because of their depredation of livestock," noted Tewes. "Other problems include increasing fragmentation of land and habitat.

"Even if a ranch wanted one, other ranches wouldn't," he said.

In recent years, automated cameras and sightings by hunters have confirmed the existence of jaguars in southern Arizona. The exact location of these sightings is being kept secret to prevent poaching, according to a 2004 article in the Arizona Daily Star.

Even though there have been no documented jaguar sightings in the Valley for 62 years, that doesn't mean there are no big cats here.

Big cats still roam the Valley, according to Laack.

"Yes, there are probably a few mountain lions here, especially in the ranch country," she said. "I have seen two - one at Laguna Atascosa and the other 17 miles north of Raymondville crossing Highway 77.

"I suspect there is a reasonably stable population here, but certainly not a lot because they need big ranges," she said.

Tewes said he has witnessed mountain lion tracks in eastern Cameron County and saw one several years ago at Laguna Atascosa. He also saw one along Highway 4 heading out to Boca Chica Beach.

Tewes calls the mountain lion population in Texas "secure," but points out the population is "less secure" in the Valley than other parts of the state.

Tewes and Laack doubt Texas will ever have a viable jaguar population again, however.

Even though there is a Mexican population of jaguars 75 miles south of the Valley, the proposed border fence will likely make it difficult for one of the Mexican cats to range into the Valley.

"The border fence could really cause a problem because we know jaguars historically traveled between the two countries," Laack noted.