

## *Leopardus pardalis* (Ocelot)

Family: Felidae (Cats)

Order: Carnivora (Carnivores)

Class: Mammalia (Mammals)



**Fig. 1.** Ocelot, *Leopardus pardalis*.

[<http://sooper-deviant.deviantart.com/art/Ocelot-1236-133773399?q=boost%3Apopular%20ocelot&qo=2>, downloaded 12 October, 2011]

**TRAITS.** Also known as, painted leopard, tigrillo, and maracaya; these felines are characterized by their sleek, smooth, cream-coloured fur adorned with brown and sometimes red markings bordered in black; marked with varying stripes to randomly shaped spots and rosettes. They are slenderly built with rounded ears that have distinguishing white spots on the back called ocelli, two black stripes that line the side of the face from the eyes, large paws and have pale coloured undersides of which the fur is the shortest on its body. Pattern does not vary between males and females. In some, the black spots on their coat form two uniform stripes that run the entire length of its back to the end of the tail. They range in size from 68 cm to 145 cm from head to tail and weigh between 18 and 40 pounds (Animal Files, 2011). Generally they are twice the size of a regular house cat and have long canines that pierce into the flesh of their prey and strong, sharp back teeth that enable them to strip meat from the bone of their kill with the males being twice

the size of the females (National Geographic Wild, 2011). They live between 7 to 10 years in the wild (The World Conservation Union, 1996). Males are called 'toms' and females are 'queens'.

**ECOLOGY.** They usually reside in swamps, savannah, coastal mangrove, forested areas and scrub of Southern North America (Texas), Central America, Central and Northern South America and Trinidad which is the only known Caribbean island they are found in. They are generally nocturnal, solitary animals and rarely hunt in groups or during the day. They feed on rabbits, rodents, small deer, reptiles, insects, tortoises and when available, fish. This comprises of 20% of their diet. The ocelot is a good swimmer and although not as good a climber as the Margay; one of its relatives, will hunt for birds, iguanas (Fig. 2) and sleep in low hanging branches of trees in its habitat (Fig. 3). Some reside in shallow dens, particularly those found in the Southern USA such as Texas and Colorado.

**SOCIAL ORGANIZATION.** Male and female cats often share territories, ranging up to 3 square miles in area. The home range of one male may overlap the home range of one or two females to which it has breeding rights over. However, the home range of a male never overlaps with one of another male. Their territory is constantly changed upon foraging for food, where they tend to occupy a new habitat when an available food source is nearby. Ocelots are polygynous, commonly solitary but some live in pairs and are territorial. Males have larger territories than females. Population densities average approximately four individuals per 5 km<sup>2</sup> in lowland tropical forests such as in South America and between two to five individuals per every 5 km<sup>2</sup> in open ranges such as grasslands. Cats that live alone often socialize with other females close to or overlapping their territory when raising kittens. When the kittens are old enough, usually twelve months, they abandon them and resume a life of solitude till they produce offspring again. Pairs usually consist of a male and a female or in some cases, a female and her kitten.

**ACTIVITY.** Most spend the majority of their time lazing in thick vegetation or in high and leafy branches of which they use 12-14 hours sleeping or hunting, depending upon availability of food. Males tend to patrol their territory mostly at night. Average hunting time is five hours and they travel up to five miles foraging despite weather conditions. Upon returning with a kill, females share with her kittens while males devour it entirely for themselves.

**FORAGING BEHAVIOUR.** They spend most of their night hunting potential prey, using odour trails which they follow using their highly sensitive nose by occasionally sniffing the ground as they travel. A study showed that they have an average of 0.9 prey captures per kilometer traveled. They are very stealthy and use the art of surprise by sneaking up on their prey, pouncing upon them and delivering a bite to the neck for an instant kill. Their stealthy walk is characterized by a crouched position with their body close to the floor, ears down and pointed backwards and their tails parallel to the ground (Fig. 4). They consume their kill at the kill site and cover the remains when they are finished. Ocelots do not contain teeth for chewing, thus they shear meat off of their kill and swallow it whole, depending on strong digestive enzymes to break down the meat (IUCN, 1996).

**COMMUNICATION.** They use olfactory communication using scents produced from urine in males as a means of marking territory and a warning to other males who may trespass; and by

females which is a method of telling males that they are ready for mating. *Leopardus pardalis* also uses vocal communication such as meows, growls and yowls. This is particularly frequent when females are in heat and is used to attract a potential mate. Mothers communicate with kittens by meowing and sometimes rubbing her head against their faces which is thought to be a way of showing affection. This is a form of visual communication. Other displays of this kind involve the female lying on her back and moving from side to side when in the presence of a male. This is also seen when females are on heat.

**SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR.** When the female ocelot is mating, she looks for a suitable shelter to give birth to her kittens in dens, rocky areas or sometimes dense thorny thickets. The male leaves his territory in search of a mate where the female courts by loudly calling via yowls, growls and rolls around on the floor exposing her belly (Fig. 6). During mating, the male sniffs the female's genitals and body and then mounts her while holding the back of her neck (Fig. 5). Mating is non seasonal with gestation lasting 70 days. Females make 'nests' by plucking tufts of fur from her underside. When kittens are being born, the mother bursts the amniotic sac to free the kitten, followed by biting off the umbilical cord and licking her new born dry of which she then consumes the after birth. A normal litter consists of an average of two kittens.

**PARENTAL BEHAVIOUR.** The female ocelot is a very dedicated mother, whereby she only leaves her kittens in a secluded den, out of reach and view of predators when she goes hunting. For the first few weeks they are fed breast milk and she eats their droppings to keep the 'nest' clean (UNICEF Wildlife, 2011). Transferring of kittens from one area to another if the mother feels threatened is done by carrying one kitten at a time by holding them at the back of their necks to which the kittens fold their legs up and tuck in their tail. It is common for first time mothers to have poor maternal instincts and have little success in raising her young. Mothers that give birth to large litters, result in raising less than half of her kittens because, in each litter it is predominant for one or two to be smaller than the rest which quickly fall behind on growth due to competition between the others for food and maternal watch. However, a study has shown that females have a small to average litter size, and one of the longest gestation periods and slowest growth rates among small felids. Emmons pointed out that these reproductive parameters suggest adaptation to low expected rates of energy acquisition, a conclusion supported by findings that ocelots spend long portions of the day hunting. A study carried out by Emmons has shown that the reason for this is because of the staple prey that the ocelots predate which most commonly are small rodents that weight less than 3% of the feline's body weight and that they are unable to reproduce in regions of low prey density due to the high energy cost in foraging for food and undergoing gestation.

**JUVENILE BEHAVIOUR.** Kittens are born with their eyes closed, a thin covering of hair and their ears folded. They play with their mother, siblings and live prey brought to them by their mother to learn how to kill them and to develop their hunting skills. They are left by their mothers when they reach sexual maturity at about 12 months of age and seek their own territories and mates. Those that are born in captivity and hand reared are tame and play with dangling objects and stuffed toys. From personal handling of a young ocelot at the Emperor Valley Zoo, Trinidad, it can be concluded that juvenile ocelots are indeed playful and constantly gnaw at hands, shoulders and may slap at hair as well as smell and lick areas of the face which has been

determined as a sign of affection by the animal. Some have been known to purr upon stroking their heads and backs.

#### REFERENCES

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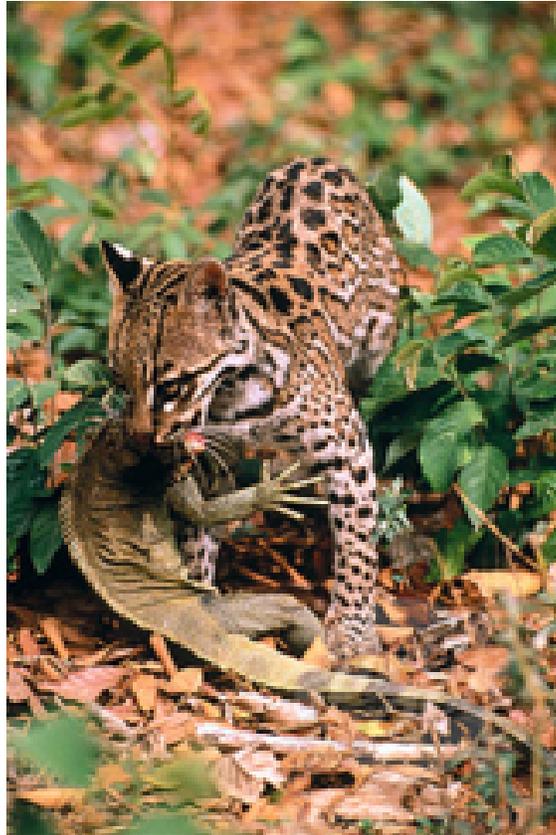
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Posted online: 2011



**Fig. 2.** Ocelot with prey in its mouth.

[[http://www.delivery.superstock.com/WI/223/1830/PreviewComp/SuperStock\\_1830-11589.jpg](http://www.delivery.superstock.com/WI/223/1830/PreviewComp/SuperStock_1830-11589.jpg), downloaded 26 September, 2011]



**Fig. 3.** Ocelot sleeping on branch of a tree.

[<http://yespinki.com/wp-content/gallery/ocelot/ocelot4.jpg>, downloaded 11 October, 2011]



**Fig. 4.** Ocelot hunting walking in crouched position, with body parallel to floor and ears pointed backwards.

[<http://nationalzoo.si.edu/publications/zoogoer/2007/1/IMAGES/Ocelot.jpg>, downloaded 11 October, 2011]

**Fig. 5.** Male ocelot biting back of female ocelot's neck, as a sign that he is ready to mate with her.

[<http://us.cdn3.123rf.com/168nwm/fancyfocus/fancyfocus1008/fancyfocus100800189/7604697-ocelot-couple-leopardus-pardalis.jpg> , downloaded 11 October, 2011]



**Fig. 6.** Female ocelot lying on her back and exposing her belly indicating she is on heat.

[<http://felids.files.wordpress.com/2011/03/ocelot.jpg>, downloaded October 11, 2011]