

Keep Texas Wild

VANISHING!

Why are some animals disappearing?



» WITHOUT A TRACE

The woods and fields around our homes are filled with delightful creatures. They all serve an important role in the circle of life. Texas has more species of animals than almost any other state, and many can only be found here. But you can no longer see a black-footed ferret, a red wolf or a Louisiana vole (like a mole) in Texas because they are extirpated (gone from Texas). Others are endangered, meaning that they might vanish soon if we don't protect and restore their habitats.

Texas Blind Salamander

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» ANIMALS AT RISK

» Ocelots

At one time, ocelots ranged from South Texas through East Texas and into Louisiana. Ocelot pelts are unique — no two are alike. These beautiful cats are about 3 feet long and probably weigh twice as much as your pet cat. Ocelots eat birds and small animals.

WHY ARE THEY ENDANGERED? Farmland and houses have replaced their native habitat. Ocelots were also overhunted for the fur trade. There are now fewer than 100 in the southern tip of Texas.

» Red-Cockaded Woodpecker

You'll have to live in the Pineywoods of East Texas to see a red-cockaded woodpecker. Cockades refer to the red patches sometimes seen on the sides of the male bird's head. The woodpeckers hollow out a cavity in an old pine tree, then make sap holes, which ooze a sticky resin, which provides a defense against tree-climbing predators.

WHY ARE THEY ENDANGERED? Many old pine forests have been cut down for lumber. Due to fire suppression, the once grassy understory is now filled with brush, so ground predators can easily climb up to the nest.

» Attwater's Prairie Chicken

Once there were 1.1 million Attwater's Prairie-Chickens on the Texas coastal prairies. The Coastal Indians danced in quick, shuffling steps copied from the movements of these birds. The male prairie-chickens "boom" loud songs while courting. Texas zoos and organizations like SeaWorld (see page 10) are helping to hatch new chicks to put back in the wild.

WHY ARE THEY ENDANGERED? There are very few coastal prairies left in Texas. We have planted crops and built homes and roads on land that was once covered by native tall grasses. On public lands, there are fewer than 100 adults left in the wild.

» Texas Horned Lizard

Texas horned lizards, like Spike (left) or the one below, were once plentiful in Texas, but now they are a rare sight. When threatened by a predator, the horned lizard puffs up, so it's not easy to swallow. This amazing creature can squirt blood from its eyelid, another defense mechanism. It's our state reptile!

WHY ARE THEY ENDANGERED? Besides being over-collected as pets, horned lizards are threatened by fire ants, loss of habitat and pollution.

» Houston Toad

The Houston toad is slightly smaller than the palm of your hand, and can only be found in Texas. Bastrop State Park and the area around it are home to the largest population of Houston toads. Males puff out their blue throats and sing to lure females each spring. The toads burrow in the sand to protect themselves from heat and cold.

WHY ARE THEY ENDANGERED? The Houston Toad forages (finds food) and hides in native grassland, which is being replaced with non-native grasses. An invasion of red imported fire ants led to the death of young toadlets and the loss of food. Pesticides and traffic are also causes.

» Texas Blind Salamander

These fascinating creatures are only found in water-filled caves near San Marcos. About 5 inches long, they have adapted to their life underground. The salamanders have no eyes, just two black dots under the skin. They have very little skin pigment, so you can almost see right inside them. They walk around the bottom on their toothpick-like legs, moving their heads from side to side to sense vibrations from snails and shrimp.

WHY ARE THEY ENDANGERED? The Texas Blind Salamander is totally dependent on the clean, cool water of the Edwards Aquifer. When the water is overused or polluted, the habitat is lost and the species is threatened.

» Two Sweet Songbirds

Two songbirds that live in the Hill Country and are about as long as your index finger are also endangered. The golden-cheeked warbler and the black-capped vireo spend their winters south of the border and then return to Texas each spring to nest. Warblers build their nests by weaving strips of juniper tree bark together with spiderwebs. Vireos construct cup-shaped nests about 2 to 4 feet above the ground in the forks of tree branches.

WHY ARE THEY ENDANGERED? Loss of habitat is the main reason why these two songbirds are endangered. Many juniper (also called cedar) trees have been cut down, and live-stock and deer have overgrazed some areas. Vireos are also threatened by cowbirds that dump their eggs in the vireos' tiny nests.

Black-Capped Vireo

Golden-Cheeked Warbler



Spike's Activity Page

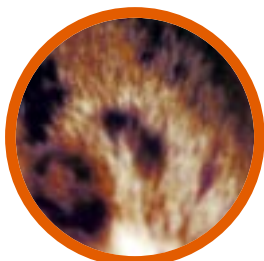


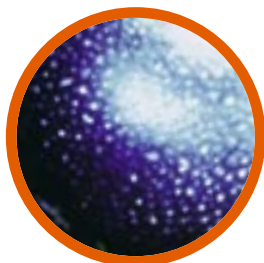
>> WILD SCIENCE

Let's take a very close look at this month's featured endangered species. Can you tell which animal is which?

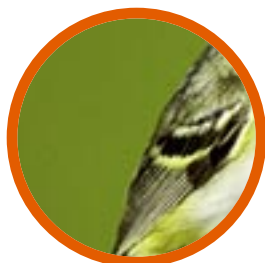














>> KEEPING IT WILD



Choose one endangered or threatened species to adopt. Find a creative way to teach your friends and family three fun facts about your animal, and three ways they can help conserve it.

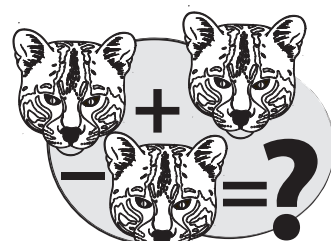
Use your imagination to get your point across. Make a colorful poster or brochure, put on a puppet show, construct a shadow box, or make up your own endangered species trading cards.

>> WILD MATH

You are a biologist studying ocelots in South Texas. In 2007, you estimated that there were 30 ocelots living on or near the wildlife refuge. In 2008, you learn that:

- 1 ocelot was killed crossing a busy road
- 2 ocelots moved on to the refuge from other habitats
- 10 ocelot kittens were born, but only four survived to adulthood.

How many ocelots are now living on or near the refuge?



NEXT MONTH: Animal Extremes

TEACHER RESOURCE

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