

## NEW RECORDS OF THE ANDEAN CAT (*LEOPARDUS JACOBITA*) IN NEUQUÉN PROVINCE, PATAGONIA, ARGENTINA

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We briefly report the first records of the Andean cat (*Leopardus jacobita*) in Neuquén province, south of the Río Colorado in the Patagonian region of Argentina (Figure 1). These records extend the known distribution of the Andean cat from the high-altitude puna into the Patagonian steppe, only hundreds of meters above sea level, at the lowest elevation ever reported. The new findings indicate that this endangered species is found all along the length of the Payunia-Auca Mahuida Guanaco Corridor, which is being created by the provinces of Neuquén and Mendoza to protect the migratory movements of the largest population of guanacos in northern Patagonia.

In August, 2008, we visited the locality of Los Chihuidos, Neuquén (38° 14' S and 69° 28' W) to check out reports by the local provincial environmental guard and other local residents that the Andean cat, locally called the “once” (ohn-say) or “onza”, resides in the area. Chihuidos is on a large, basaltic plateau of approximately 1100 m.a.s.l., above the valley of the Río Neuquén to the west, with numerous rocky cliffs on all sides. These cliffs are inhabited by mountain vizcachas (*Lagidium viscacia*), the principal prey of the Andean cat in the puna. The vegetation is Patagonian monte at lower elevations and Patagonian steppe at higher elevations. The main livelihood of local people in the area is raising goats.

We visited an establishment with a collection of skins of various species, among which was that of an Andean cat. This skin measured 795 mm in length, with a 418 mm tail. We interviewed the hunter from whom the skin had been purchased, who said that the cat was a male, killed approximately three years ago. He killed it with a boleadora, after his dog trapped it among the rocks over the Río Neuquén, where it had dragged a goat. This site is at approximately 650 m.a.s.l.

At the home of another resident, where the environmental guard told us a similar cat had been killed approximately 20 days earlier, we found a skin of a large male that was still drying (Figure 2), and measured 800 mm, with a 500 mm tail. The hunter had been seeing the cat’s sign for several months, and believed that it had killed a few of his goats. It was killed by his dogs, along the riverside, at an elevation between 600 and 700 m.a.s.l.

We talked to one other person who had seen an once, also on the riverside, about 5 years ago. He tried to shoot it, but it ran away unhurt. In addition, another once was apparently shot approximately 10 years ago, but no skin or other remains are available for confirmation.

According to the environmental guard and the second hunter, this species has “always” been here. The environmental guard was taught by his mother how to distinguish the tracks from the other small cats in the area. Nevertheless, not all the people in the area are aware of the presence of the species, and the person who tried to shoot one that escaped said that he did not know of the presence of the species before.

The puma was extirpated from the area during the last century, and has re-colonized during the last ten years. Because it was absent until recently,

most residents believe it is an invasive, exotic species. Local people suffer extensive losses of goats to pumas, and their attitude towards predators is very negative. Any predator is killed whenever the opportunity arises. We are aiming to reduce this indiscriminate killing by working with some of the goat herders in the Payunia-Auca Mahuida Guanaco

Corridor to reduce losses to predation through the use of locally-bred guard dogs, and to reduce stocking rates of goats by increasing their per capita yield through improved management.

The discovery of the Andean cat in Neuquén was made during surveys of the area carried out because the Río Neuquén is set to be flooded by a dam. We have proposed the creation of a 200,000-ha protected area in Chihuidos in compensation for the loss of habitat due to the dam, with a fiduciary fund provided by the company building the dam to maintain the reserve in perpetuity. The initial proposal has been received positively by the province. In addition, we are working with multinational oil and mining companies active in the area to reduce and compensate their impacts on mountain vizcachas, Andean cats, guanacos, and other wildlife species. §



Figure 1. Location of Los Chihuidos in Neuquén province, Argentina.



Figure 2. Skin of Andean cat killed in Aug, 2008