

COURSE OF THE SUN GOD

Macho B and his phantom trails in Arizona and New Mexico. By Tim Findley

Late summer sunlight splattered through the thorn and juniper trees, casting small shadows that blended perfectly with the speckled coat of the big cat. Jack Childs, expecting to videotape a mountain lion, watched his dogs in their howling and baying and tried to see what they sensed. But at first, he could spot nothing, not the tawny hide of the lion he expected, or the ring tail of a raccoon. Then, suddenly, in what he describes as a life-changing moment, he realized he was looking at a full-grown jaguar draped in a crook of the tree and looking down on him and his dogs with almost laconic indifference.

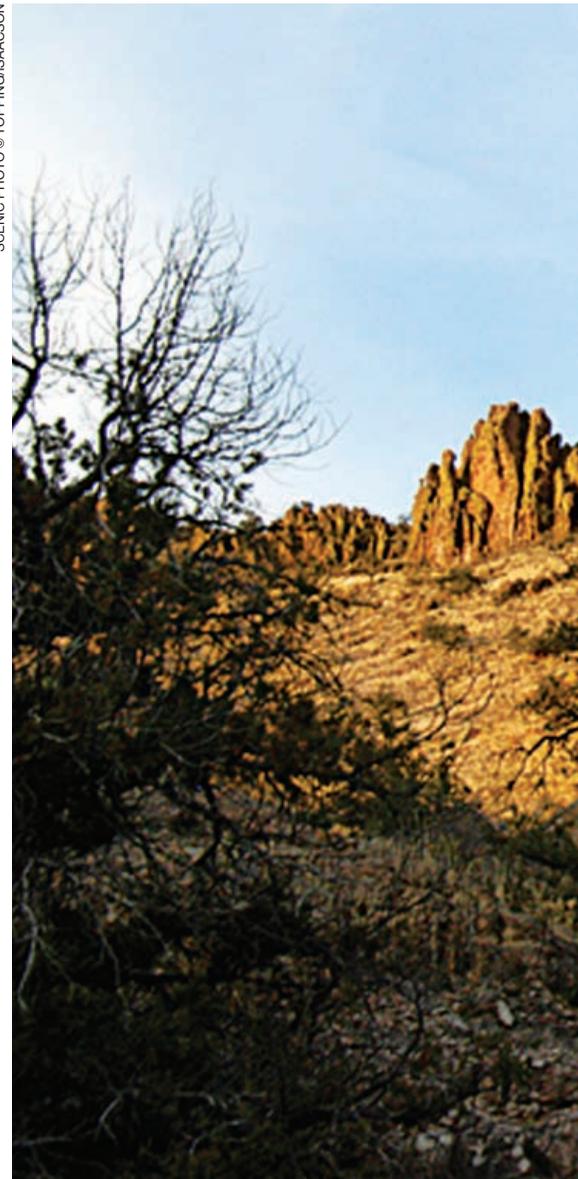
and property owners all over the Southwest pledged never to shoot him, even if he attacked their livestock. Yet he was from the beginning an iconic symbol of controversy over the future of the region.

In his name, the notoriously litigious Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) last January petitioned the secretary of the Interior to designate vast areas of the Southwest east into Texas and Louisiana as critical habitat for the jaguar. Sixty-two million acres in Arizona and New Mexico alone have been mapped by CBD for protection from human interfer-



JAGUAR PHOTO © MATT COLVIN

SCENIC PHOTO © TOPPING/ISAGCON



The legendary cat leaves more questions than answers. This was Jack Childs' first sighting, thanks to his dogs, in the Baboquivari Mountains (shown at right) southwest of Tucson, Ariz.

That morning in August 1996, in the Baboquivari Mountains southwest of Tucson, Ariz., could be said to have changed many lives. Only five months earlier in the Peloncillo Mountains to the east, Malpais rancher Warner Glenn had a similar encounter in which he took the first still photos of a jaguar north of the border. It was apparently not the same animal, and it was not seen again, but, together, the two sightings began a remarkable 13-year saga on the trail of the jaguar they called Macho B that would unintentionally lead to his doom, yet assure his virtual immortality.

Like the powerful spirit that Mayans and Aztecs regarded as a god of contradiction, responsible for both the sun and the night, Macho B crossed through the imaginations and dreams of those who followed him through his occasional appearances in the lenses of some 50 automatic sensor cameras in Arizona and New Mexico. He appeared like a phantom, then vanished again into the harsh mountains that once shielded Geronimo. He was a magnificent cat, strong and cunning in a species that is the world's third-largest feline, next only to lions and tigers.

No one wanted Macho B to die. Ranchers

ence, including removal of any walls on the Mexican border. All for one dead jaguar, although many suspect it is really for the purpose of securing a key part of the long-held plan of radicals like David Foreman for creation of the Wildlands Project, virtually cutting the United States in half with corridors for predators from, as they used to say, “the Yucatan to the Yukon.”

Jaguars were, and are, native to Central America. Although they were once seen far into North America, their numbers have declined since the 1700s not only due to hunting, but also because of a lack of adequate prey and sources of water in northern latitudes. Federal wildlife authorities killed what was thought to be the last jaguar in the United States in the early 20th century. Over the years, scat and tracks found in New Mexico and Arizona indicated that individual animals still made forays into the region,

probably from two known groups of jaguar that still exist, and relatively thrive, in Mexican Sonora some 150 miles south. No breeding pair was seen north of the border, and no evidence was found that the loners stayed long in their sojourn into the United States.

Macho B would break that rule. When he was captured in 2009, 13 years after first being photographed by Jack Childs, the 118-pound cat was the oldest jaguar ever found in the wild, and he had lived most of his life amid the controversy that followed his every move in Arizona and New Mexico. Not even the expert mountain-lion hunter and tracker Childs or his younger partner Emil McCain, both assigned to seeking his trail, ever saw Macho B in that time, except in the 60 or so photos he tripped himself. “I’ve been very, very close to Macho B,” Emil McCain told a reporter for *High Country News* in 2007. “I know he’s seen me. I just haven’t seen him.”

Like Childs, Warner Glenn is an experienced mountain-lion hunter, and that was on his mind when he decided to use his camera instead of the gun he carried to “shoot” the jaguar near his ranch. Malpais is a centerpiece along with the Gray Ranch in The Nature Conservancy’s showcase of cooperation between ranchers and environmentalists in the Malpais Borderlands Group. Glenn knew from that association that the jaguar, even in Mexico, was listed as threatened, and he respected what advice TNC’s specialists might provide.

The animal Glenn saw might have been just a fluke, a rogue cat that would soon go back south. But when Childs stumbled on Macho B five months later, it raised new interest. So it was Malpais, with TNC backing, that spread the word of Macho B, even among ranchers and other property holders who could see that what was coming might



very well threaten their livelihood and way of life. They all knew that Macho B, even unseen, could become the spotted owl of the Southwest.

Arizona Game & Fish authorities knew little more about jaguars in the United States than the anecdotal tales of encounters going back as far as 500 years. With their counterparts from New Mexico, the state game officials assembled what amounted to a remarkable Southwest congress devoted solely to determining what brought Macho B north of the border and whether he would survive there. It was an unwieldy coalition of state game officials, ranchers, an array of variously organized environmental interests, and a few scientists more and mostly less capable of advising on the history and habits of the jaguar.

At first, the Center for Biological Diversity wanted nothing to do with it. The Nature Conservancy is a nonprofit corporation run by bankers and businessmen that wants power and influence with a low public profile, but CBD is directed by dogmatic idealists who fund the organization with confrontation and federally subsidized lawsuits on behalf of the Endangered Species Act. The jaguar was intriguing to them, but they wanted no part of a coalition they couldn't control and, besides, they had already selected a surrogate for another of their habitat suits in the leopard frog, which, awkwardly, seemed to be making a comeback from extinction. From the beginning of their participation in the Jaguar Conservation Team (JCT), frustrated representatives of CBD were less interested in the study than in the lawsuits they muttered about to declare the jaguar endangered.

It was TNC that invited Dr. Alan Rabinowitz to offer his advice to the newly formed team. Rabinowitz, then executive director of the Science and Exploration Division of the New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society, and now president and CEO of the wildcat-protecting Panthera, is celebrated as one of the foremost experts in the world on big cats. "The Indiana Jones of wildlife," as one publication called him, has traveled the world in his 30 years of work on behalf of tigers, leopards and jaguars, including his acclaimed success in establishing the

world's first jaguar preserve in Belize. Macho B was right down his alley, and worried ranchers feared that his advice might establish the jaguar as an endangered species and begin a process to seal off land as critical habitat.

But it was the national publicity on the "last jaguar" orchestrated by TNC that would settle that issue with pressure on state game and fish officials to bow to the threatened lawsuits and seek endangered status in 1997 for the jaguar in both the United States and Mexico.

Macho B, meanwhile, was learning his territory. Slipping like a spirit through both desert hot days and clear nights ablaze with stars, season after season he left few tracks. He crossed the paths of smugglers and illegal aliens sneaking into the United States, their trails littered with debris and even an occasional body of a crosser unable to survive the harsh, waterless conditions. But jaguars are hunters, not scavengers,

and it was unclear what Macho B was doing for food or water.

State authorities, along with Childs and McCain, knew from earlier sensor photos that there had been a younger Macho A jaguar that B was following, perhaps even stalking. But by 2004, Macho A had disappeared and all the photo sightings identified Macho B by the distinctive pattern of his spots, or rosettes, one forming a cartoon shape they dubbed Pinocchio, and another reminding them of Betty Boop.

What the conservation team wanted most to know was the range and direction of the jaguar's movements to establish his own habitat. Yet for years he left only tantalizing clues that the two trackers could not confidently match into a pattern. Childs and McCain never denied they used female jaguar scat acquired from the Phoenix Zoo at times to lure Macho B in range of the sensor cameras. But with the endangered designation as the legal bullet it wanted, the Center for Biological Diversity now showed new interest, producing its own maps of what the subcommittee on the conservation team was still trying to determine to be jaguar habitat.

Rancher Judy Keeler recognized a map brought to the table by CBD "predator specialist" Michael Robinson as following the pattern of the Wildlands Project.

Rabinowitz began his study of Macho B in late 1997 and within weeks was ready with a report on his findings. "I have yet to see or hear about any place in the United States that meets the criteria of jaguar habitat," he wrote. "What you have proven is that there are corridors which jaguars have used to enter the United States. The only important questions now are: where are they coming from, why don't they stay around, and where do they go when they leave?"

That wasn't what Robinson and CBD wanted to hear. Although he presented himself as a scientist and expressed an intimidating impatience with the work of the conservation team, calling it "the conversation team," Robinson could not nearly match the experience and expertise of Rabinowitz. His own background was focused on leading the CBD's efforts to introduce the Mexican wolf into the same region. He insisted that Rabinowitz's findings of insufficient prey and lack of water sources in the area he had already mapped "may be manipulated through appropriate management."

The years were passing, with Macho B occasionally appearing in the trip cameras and then vanishing again into the mountains. The conservation team needed most to know where he had come from and why he remained alone in the region north of the border. They had to have a better record that only the capture and collaring of the jaguar with a tracking device could tell them. In 2006, they recommended capturing and collaring the jaguar, but the environmentalists on their committee threatened a media blitz against the capture of Macho B.

Arizona Game & Fish officials insist it was never their intention that the jaguar would come upon a snare set at some 4,000 feet in the Atascosa Mountains to capture a mountain lion they intended to release in another area, but at last in February 2009 Macho B, caught in the leg snare, could be tranquilized, then collared and released, to study his movements. "All on the conservation team were excited," said rancher Judy Keeler, "and I think relieved that we could now learn more about him."

Veterinarians who examined the cat said Macho B was in remarkably good shape for the oldest living jaguar ever found. He had apparently eaten well, and recently, and showed no signs of dehydration. Still, the

PHOTO © AL TOPPING



Jack Childs and Buddy.

mysterious jaguar offered no clue in their examinations to his survival in this harsh country. Fitted with a radio transmitting collar, he was released in the grassy woodlands where he was captured, and quickly moved up into the rocky walls of a canyon where Childs and McCain suspected he had a lair. But, too soon, the transmissions they monitored went still. Game & Fish agents hiked into the mountains, worried over what they might find. When after two days they did locate Macho B, they found him lethargic, too defeated even to resist their approach. The great spiritual symbol of the Maya that had eluded them for so long was only adding to the enigma. Taken by helicopter to specialists at the Phoenix Zoo, the old jaguar was found to be suffering from irreversible kidney failure. Rather than let him suffer a long death in captivity or back in the wild, the decision was made to euthanize.



PHOTO COURTESY ARIZONA GAME & FISH DEPARTMENT

Macho B had been tracked for 13 years in Arizona and New Mexico. He slipped through the desert like a spirit and left few tracks, being seen only by sensor cameras. The 118-pound cat was the oldest jaguar ever found in the wild when he was caught in a trap set by Arizona Game & Fish biologists to capture a mountain lion to be released in another area. Macho B was tranquilized, collared and released to study his movements. Radical activists have already offered a map of 54 million acres in four states to federal agents for use as “critical jaguar habitat.”

The conservation team was crushed. For all their efforts, they would never know what brought the jaguar into the Southwest. But Kieran Suckling, executive director of the Center for Biological Diversity, hardly took a breath before issuing a statement saying that he was “still reeling from the tragic death of Macho B—the last wild American jaguar, killed on March 2.” He accused Game & Fish authorities of bungling the capture and sedation of the cat and announced, of course, that his group would be filing suit to prevent any such captures in the future. Then he asked for contributions to pay the \$40,000 he needed “to save the life of the next jaguar that enters the United States.”

Despite the years of voluntary service in tracking and photographing Macho B, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in March issued a vague threat to indict Emil McCain on charges of baiting the trap for the cat with female jaguar scat, a charge McCain has denied. And later that month, Michael Robin-

son, self-proclaimed expert from the Center for Biological Diversity, presented the federal service with a map claiming close to 54 million acres of land in New Mexico, Arizona, Southern California and Texas as critical habitat for jaguars. Who says it’s just cats that feed on their own?

There is talk of stuffing Macho B’s distinctive hide to be used as a historic exhibit, but his spirit lives in the new battle that has just begun as CBD seeks to claim the vast region it marks as critical habitat while threatening lawsuits against the diligent volunteers from the Jaguar Conservation Team who tried to save him.

In March, more than a year after Macho B’s death, Arizona Game & Fish authorities fired biologist Thornton Smith for working with tracker McCain and using female scat to lure the jaguar into the area where he was captured. The green-promised blitz immediately rolled out their media guns against G&F officials. At the same time, they loaded their

coffers with \$91,000 in federal tax funds paid to them (\$53,000 to CBD and \$38,000 to Defenders of Wildlife) to cover their legal costs in suing the government for more than 53 million acres they claim is jaguar habitat.

“I don’t believe they really give a damn about the jaguar,” said Childs, the first man to see Macho B. “I think all the center wants is power for themselves.”

Years more of litigation are ahead in the still-stalking spirit of the Sun God. ■

RANGE investigative chief Tim Findley wants to thank photographer Al Topping and tracker Jack Childs for their help in producing this piece. Childs and his wife Anna have written a remarkable book, “Ambushed on the Jaguar Trail,” containing stories of the tracker and exceptional photos of Macho B as well as the rich variety of wildlife in the borderlands region. It is a paperback published by Rio Nuevo Publishers and is available at www.treasurechestbooks.com or by calling 1-800-969-9558.