

LOWER RIO GRANDE VALLEY

NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

The south Texas nights still harbor a sound that has nearly disappeared from the United States. In the dense thorn-forest communities of the Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge, a soft rustling of grasses and the harried, retreating footsteps of small mammals, reptiles and birds, accompanies the padded-foot prowling of two small, endangered cats—the ocelot and the jaguarundi.

These rare cats reach the northern edge of their range in south Texas, and here at this 90,000-acre refuge, already fragmented into nearly 115 parcels, they find some of the last habitat remaining to them in this country. The ocelot and jaguarundi are joined by a community of 513 bird species, including some colorful characters rarely seen elsewhere in the United States. Species like the great kiskadee, least grebe, green parakeet, altamira oriole and green jay travel no farther north than Texas. The bird life here is so diverse and unique that 200,000 eco-tourists visit the area each year, pumping nearly \$150 million into local economies. These rich refuge lands are at the nexus of four climate zones—tropical, temperate, coastal and desert—and the confluence of the Mississippi and Central flyways. In this region, considered one of the most diverse in North America, 11 distinct biotic communities exist—ranging from Chihuahuan desert scrub to tidal wetlands to one of the last remaining sabal palm forests in the country. More than 1,100 members of the plant kingdom have taken root here, as have 700 vertebrate species—including javalinas, bobcats, white-lipped frogs and the highly endangered Kemp's Ridley sea turtle. The refuge also supports more than 300 species of butterflies—half of the species present in the country. Exquisite zebra longwings, Julias and Mexican bluewings can all be seen here. In fact, at peak times in fall, it is possible to see nearly 100 different butterfly species on a single outing.

Designed as a new model for refuges, the Lower Rio Grande Valley refuge was established to create a wildlife corridor and protect rare and unique habitat types, fulfilling the refuge improvement act's call for growing the refuge system to conserve unique and various ecosystems. But human populations have been expanding in the Rio Grande valley. When the refuge was established in 1979, the surrounding population was only a third of what it is today. In the 2000 census, the nearby

Ocelot | © Tim Fitzharris/Minden Pictures



McAllen metropolitan area had the fourth-highest population growth in the nation.⁸ For a refuge geared toward piecing together fragments of habitat being swallowed by development, life under a federal administration that has withheld land acquisition funding for six years is grim. From the outset, the goal of this refuge has been to secure 132,000 acres encompassing each of the rapidly disappearing 11 biotic communities. But it remains 40,000 acres short of its goal. Meanwhile, habitat is disappearing like sand through a sieve. The valley has already lost all but 5 percent of its natural habitat.⁹

And while land is slipping away, the refuge also faces the imminent threat of current refuge lands being divided and degraded by a wall along the United States-Mexico border. The Department of Homeland Security plan would destroy or fragment many miles of refuge habitat, restrict entrance and opportunity for the tens of thousands of eco-tourists—who significantly boost the local economies—and also block access to the Rio Grande River, the primary water source for wildlife and farmers in this semi-arid region. In short, the wall would destroy the very things safeguarded by the refuge improvement act, namely the biological integrity, diversity and environmental health of the refuge.

As for the endangered ocelot, whose recovery depends on access to sister populations in Mexico—and for the 20 threatened and endangered species found on this refuge—the wall would have dire consequences indeed.



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