



Willacy County Commissioners Court

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Willacy County Aims to Increase Roadway Safety and Protection of Wildlife

*Joins Texas Department of Transportation
– Installs Wildlife Crossings on SH 186 East
Written By: Sally Velasquez*

Raymondville, TX - Willacy County and the Texas Department of Transportation have partnered to enhance roadway wildlife and public safety on State Highway 186 East in Willacy County. Two Wildlife Crossings signs were installed by the Texas Department of Transportation in partnership with Willacy County upon the county's request. The signs are about two miles apart at the Bait Bridge there vicinity where the two recent ocelots were subjected to roadkill on State Highway 186 - East in Willacy County.

"It is imperative we take the loss of the ocelot habitat as a serious issue. We must raise the awareness of motorists traveling on all wildlife corridors. Roadkill threatens humans as well as animals," said Willacy County Judge Aurelio Guerra on behalf of himself and the Willacy County Commissioners Court.



In addition to County Judge Aurelio Guerra, the other County Commissioners include Eliberto Guerra, Prct. 1, Oscar de Luna, Prct. 2, Alfredo Serrato, Prct. 3 and Eduardo Gonzales, Prct. 4.

The next step is for Texas Department of Transportation to coordinate with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and install underground wildlife crossings and fencing to keep the ocelots off the road, since road mortality is the number one cause of death for the species. These underground wildlife crossings and proper fencing will provide a safe passage along the wildlife corridor, and also keep the motorist safe. Other species such as nilgai and white-tailed deer on this State Highway 186 should also be considered as a safety hazard to motorists because they can cause extensive serious damage to the vehicle and the motorist as well.

County, state transportation agency administrators, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and the East Foundation are closely monitoring the activity of the ocelot and remain in constant collaboration with one another in attempt to seek methods to curb the mortality rate of the ocelot, a wild cat known to roam in two deep South Texas counties. Each organization has launched efforts to ensure they are taking the protection of the ocelot and its habitat seriously and with initiatives that are aimed to increase awareness.

“As county officials, we are readily available to facilitate our leadership role because we care, we encourage roadway safety of our citizens and tourists. Equally important, we recognize the wild cat habitat exist in our county jurisdiction in greater population. Nonetheless, the ocelot is a federally listed highly endangered species,” said Willacy County Precinct Two, County Commissioner Oscar de Luna.

The Willacy County Commissioners Court is closely working with the East Foundation, a private organization with a mission to support wildlife conservation and other public benefits of ranching and private land stewardship. Two of the ranches in Willacy County are areas with ocelot habitat are known to exist and each have conservation methods with the aim to increase protection of the wildcat.

“With healthy populations of ocelots across the private lands of eastern Willacy, the risks of road mortalities are naturally higher. The East Foundation supports all efforts at increasing the awareness of this important species,” said Dr. Neil Wilkins, with the East Foundation.

With the proper placement of ocelot wildlife crossings and fencing, it will reduce the risk of road mortalities, and increase the population numbers for the ocelot. The death of one cat is one too many due to the low numbers of the existing population.

In general, Willacy County is the rural county with a mission to increase its tourism market potential and to promote the natural resources throughout the county through research, education and community outreach.

“I am honored to work with my court colleagues with unified support to promote nature tourism and reinforce our valued partnership with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife. Jointly, we aim to maintain our county roadways to ensure the public has mobility, access, and safety,” County Commissioner, Precinct One Eliberto Guerra stated.

Commissioner Eliberto Guerra’s Precinct 1 boundary consists of two public refuge tracts, totaling 46,000 acres, owned and managed by the US Fish & Wildlife Service in an average total of 46,000 acres.

“Port of Mansfield’s economic impact is over 90% derived from tourists’ dollars. We join the county and transportation officials to encourage roadway safety to protect the diverse wildlife that can also be viewed with an *‘up close and personal’* experience at the port,” said Tom Floyd, President of the Port Mansfield Chamber of Commerce.

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Willacy County Natural Resources – Objective

Willacy County stands ready to address challenges by taking advantage of ongoing work that began with capital investment on projects with an aim to promote economic development, conservation, restoration of coastal science, preservation of habitat, water quality and promotion of natural resources.

Willacy County's leadership is poised to build and to develop its community's human capital by joining partnerships, investments and in alliance with various business interests to obtain economic resilience and jointly develop education programs with public schools and local organizations to enhance coastal science learning and wildlife management.



Ocelot - photo was taken by Sihil D. Martinez. A "white-nose" ocelot from the Cincinnati Zoo. This ocelot is a part of the annual Ocelot Festival held at Gladys Porter Zoo the past couple of years. Photo provided for by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service – Lower Rio Grande Valley Wildlife Refuge

SAVE THE TEXAS OCELOT

MEET THE OCELOT

SLIGHTLY ROUNDED **EARS**

DISTINCT **MARKINGS** WITH DARK BORDERS

LONG, RINGED **TAIL**

MEDIUM-SIZED CAT **15-30LBS**



OCELOTS IN TROUBLE

OCELOTS ARE FEDERALLY LISTED AS **ENDANGERED** IN THE UNITED STATES.

< **80** OCELOTS REMAIN IN THE COUNTRY.



UNLIKE MOST OTHER CATS, OCELOTS CAN TURN THEIR ANKLE JOINTS AROUND, ALLOWING THEM TO CLIMB DOWN A TREE **HEADFIRST**



TOP PREDATORS IN THE THORNY BRUSH FORESTS OF TEXAS, OCELOTS MOSTLY PREY ON **RABBITS, MICE, RATS AND BIRDS.**



IN TEXAS, OCELOTS RELY ON THORNY BRUSH FOR SHELTER AND PROTECTION AND REQUIRE A LOT OF SPACE.

1 male needs **25** square miles of territory.



OCELOTS **ONCE RANGED** FROM SOUTH TEXAS UP INTO ARIZONA, ARKANSAS AND LOUISIANA.

THEY ARE **NOW** FOUND ONLY IN SOUTH TEXAS RANGLANDS AND THE LAGUNA ATASCOSA NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE.



95% OF THE OCELOT'S THORNY BRUSH HABITAT HAS BEEN LOST.



40% of the ocelots studied over the past 30 years have been **KILLED** by vehicles.



SAVING THE ENDANGERED OCELOT

THE U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE AND PARTNERS WORK TO PROTECT OCELOTS IN SOUTH TEXAS BY:

MONITORING OCELOTS LIVING ON THE REFUGE AND PRIVATE LANDS.

PROTECTING, RESTORING AND CONNECTING THORN FOREST HABITAT.

WORKING WITH THE TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION TO INSTALL UNDER-ROAD WILDLIFE CROSSINGS THAT HELP KEEP OCELOTS OFF THE ROAD.

PLANNING TO TRANSLOCATE (MOVE) OCELOTS WITHIN TEXAS AND FROM MEXICO TO BRING MUCH NEEDED GENETIC DIVERSITY TO THE SMALL REMAINING POPULATION.



YOU CAN HELP! OCELOTS!

ADOPT AN OCELOT to support conservation through the Friends of Laguna Atascosa.



LIVE IN TEXAS? Report ocelot sightings to (956) 748-3608, x111.

LEARN MORE GO TO www.fws.gov/refuge/laguna_atascosa & www.savetexasocelots.org

FOLLOW "Viva the Ocelot" on Facebook

Graphic: Provided by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service – Lower Rio Grande Valley Wildlife Refuge



PORT MANSFIELD – Wildlife Viewing, Scrubland, Brush Area Terrain



PORT MANSFIELD - Mudflats and Sand Dune Coastal Area Terrain