

Making Ripples

Unexpected Native Wildlife

by Amanda Bancroft

Some things seem downright American, like apple pie and bald eagles. But ring-tail cats, jaguars and ocelots? Parrots and flying squirrels? They may seem unfamiliar and exotic, but even here in Arkansas we have natives that evolved to live in our home ecosystems despite appearing foreign or ancient. That's just one of the many reasons nature is awesome!

Since mountain lions (or cougars, as they're sometimes called) are so rare in Arkansas, it's hard to imagine that ocelots were once found here too. Ocelots are small cats that look like leopards, with spots on their back and legs but stripes along their sleek necks. The US is also host to the Gulf Coast Jaguarundi, which can be found in southern Texas. The jaguarundi is short and stocky, appearing similar to an otter crossed with a cougar, their close relative.

We even once had jaguars in Arkansas and across the southern US; unfortunately, their US populations were wiped out in the early 1900's. The last known female jaguar was shot by a hunter in 1963, but conservationists are hoping to protect more of the species' former habitat and encourage a breeding population to take root. It's a great tragedy that our country and state have lost some of these majestic and powerful wild animals that are tourist attractions for safaris and other natural adventures in other parts of the world. Perhaps these true native species can be so surprising here because we're used to hearing about them from safaris!

You've probably seen a raccoon around your house at night, but did you know that Arkansas also has ringtails, or ring-tailed cats? These nocturnal and elusive animals have long furry tails like a ring-tailed lemur, with a slender body that looks similar to a cat despite the fact that they're in the raccoon family. However, they're small (only one or two pounds) and typically about two feet long even though the tail makes up roughly half their length.

Another nocturnal and difficult-to-spot Arkansas native is the Southern Flying Squirrel. Along with the Northern Flying Squirrel, the two species make up the only flying squirrels found within the US (there are many dozens of other flying squirrel species across the globe). Although they glide on skin flaps rather than actually fly, they are adorable and still pretty cool. They have an omnivorous diet, but some people are surprised to learn that flying squirrels are the most carnivorous type of squirrel, often feeding on carrion.

There are many species that once roamed here or continue to hold on by a thread to their existence, including the coati, a couple of parrot species, freshwater mussels, salamanders, and the luna moth. But maybe the most surprising native species is the opossum; after all, while most of us know what it looks like, doesn't it seem as though this marsupial belongs in Australia?

Amanda Bancroft is a writer, artist, and naturalist building an off-grid earthbag cottage for land conservation on Mt. Kessler. She and her husband Ryan blog about their adventures and offer a solar-hosted online educational center on how to make a difference with everyday choices at: www.RipplesBlog.org.