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Mother jaguars may flirt to save their cubs' lives

Newly witnessed strategy may prevent infanticide

24 JAN 2022 • 11:20 AM • BY GRAYCEN WHEELER



APRIL KELLY/DAVE TAYLOR/MARK OF THE JAGUAR

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It was almost Valentine's Day 2020, and love was in the air—jaguar love, that is. A pair of the spotted big cats tumbled in the grass, sending throaty mating growls through the grasses of Hato La Aurora Nature Reserve in Colombia's tropical savanna region. When wildcat ecologist Diana Stasiukynas of the big cat conservation philanthropy Panthera saw videos of the tryst, however, she was concerned.

Observers had recently photographed the growling female jaguar hunting and playing with her 5-month-old cub; now, she was cavorting with a male jaguar—and no one had seen her offspring for days. When the young cat reappeared with its mother a few days later, Stasiukynas realized she may have witnessed a never-before-seen anti-infanticide strategy.

Male jaguars sometimes [kill young cubs that are not their own](#) in order to mate with their mothers. Such violence frees up a potential partner and may eliminate a future competitor, but it comes at a high cost to the females.

This battle of the sexes also occurs in other big cats. Mother lions and pumas hide their young during sex to prevent infanticide. This tactic could trick several males into believing a cub is their own to discourage them from killing it. A flirty escapade might also boost the male's perception of his own sexual success, leaving him less likely to commit infanticide out of desperation.

Now, Stasiukynas and colleagues have found that [female jaguars use similar “hide and flirt” tactics](#) to protect their cubs from infanticidal males, they report in *Acta Ethologica*. After witnessing the Valentine’s Day tumble, Stasiukynas combed through the literature and found no reports of similar behavior in jaguars. But when she shared the story with colleagues in Brazil, she found that they had also seen a nursing mother jaguar engaging in courtship activities. In two of the cases—in the Llanos of Colombia and the Northern Pantanal in Brazil—the mothers reunited with their cubs afterward. The observations are the first published examples of jaguars using anti-infanticide tactics in the wild, she says.

To some observers, the courtship rituals aren’t very romantic. “Jaguar flirting is not soft,” Stasiukynas says. Jaguars engage in a pre-coital mock fight, during which the female bares her teeth and makes guttural vocalizations (see video, above). A pair of jaguars typically spends 2 or 3 days sparring in between bouts of sex.

Researchers don’t know how the stashed cubs pass their days—a testament to their hiding abilities. Florida panther kittens in similar scenarios [can lose up to 20% of their body weight](#) while their mother is entertaining suitors. But jaguar dens are such well-kept secrets that experts don’t know how cubs fare in their mother’s absence, or even how long they may stay hidden.

The new results are important despite the small number of observations, says Ronaldo Morato, a researcher who studies jaguar movement ecology as the head of the National Predator Center at the Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity Conservation. “We need to concentrate efforts to collect more of this kind of data about natural history of this species.”

Still, Morato says it will be important to explore how this behavior might change in different environments, particularly where land development and the presence of people affect available hiding places. Humans can crowd jaguars into smaller forested patches, where the cats face steeper competition for food and mates. Such close quarters could bring about more infanticide, Stasiukynas confirms, and inspire different strategies to prevent it.

Jaguars living in denser rainforests might also use different strategies, says Stasiukynas, who notes that all the observations in the new study were in savanna regions that only offer sparse riverside forests for cover.

As increased tourism leads to more frequent jaguar encounters, researchers are likely to gain more insight into anti-infanticide behaviors. And understanding how female jaguars hide their cubs in different environments could help conservationists reduce infanticide, Stasiukynas says. “If we know a little bit more about jaguar reproduction, maybe we can take conservation actions in the first few years of life.”

doi: 10.1126/science.ada0485

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