



SPRING 2023

# THE TRACKS YOU LEAVE BEHIND

## Safe Crossings and Open Corridors

*Protecting wildlife on the move*

When wildlife and humans share the landscape, connectivity—the ability of animals to move freely from place to place—is often compromised. Highways and other busy roads intersect wildlife movement corridors, posing a serious safety hazard for wildlife and people when vehicles collide with animals attempting to cross. In some areas, fencing and other manmade obstacles block access to critical wildlife habitat and migratory routes. Defenders works with partners across the country to address these connectivity issues and has some recent successes in the West to share.

In California, we were part of a coalition that successfully intervened in court to uphold two Ventura County ordinances that increase protections for wildlife corridors by requiring environmental reviews for projects that may impact wildlife connectivity. Southeast of Ventura, in Riverside, a bipartisan group led by Sen. Diane Feinstein (D-Calif.) and Sen. Alex Padilla (D-Calif.) introduced legislation we supported to establish Western Riverside County National Wildlife Refuge. The refuge

will protect habitat—including important wildlife corridors—for at least 146 species and provide access to nature for the nearly 12 million people who live in urban areas surrounding the refuge.

In New Mexico, Defenders led a successful advocacy campaign that resulted in the creation of a statewide Wildlife Corridors Action Plan that addresses the need for wildlife crossing infrastructure across the state and identifies 11 priority areas for crossing projects. In the central part of the state, we worked with the Pueblo of Santa



OCELOT | © LARRY DITTO



MEXICAN GRAY WOLF | © REBECCA BOSE



WHOOPING CRANE | © RYAN HAGERTY

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© JAKE STROUF

**An ocelot and her kitten cross a road in Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge.**

Ana to map wildlife movements on the tribe's reservation lands to pinpoint barriers to it and identify areas in need of wildlife crossing infrastructure. We also produced

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## Safe Crossings and Open Corridors

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a short film, “Crossing New Mexico,” to highlight priority sites for safe passage infrastructure projects.

In Washington, we released a connectivity report—a joint project with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Washington State Department of Transportation and others—that drew on cutting-edge modeling methods to examine current movement corridors, linkages and barriers to wildlife movement in the southwestern part of the state.

In Texas, a rare sighting of a female ocelot and

her kitten crossing a main road in Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge in February reaffirmed the importance of our connectivity work. The duo provided a powerful reminder of the necessity of safe passage for wildlife and the importance of promoting coexistence between wildlife and humans by educating the public about the connectivity issues impacting these imperiled cats now limited to a small breeding population of about 60 to 80 cats in South Texas. 🐾

## Mexican Gray Wolf Population Breaks 200 for First Time

The wild population of Mexican gray wolves in the U.S. continues to grow.

According to the 2022 annual count, the wild population has seen a 23% increase, marking the seventh consecutive year of growth in the wild. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recorded 241 Mexican gray wolves in the wild, up from 196 in 2021.

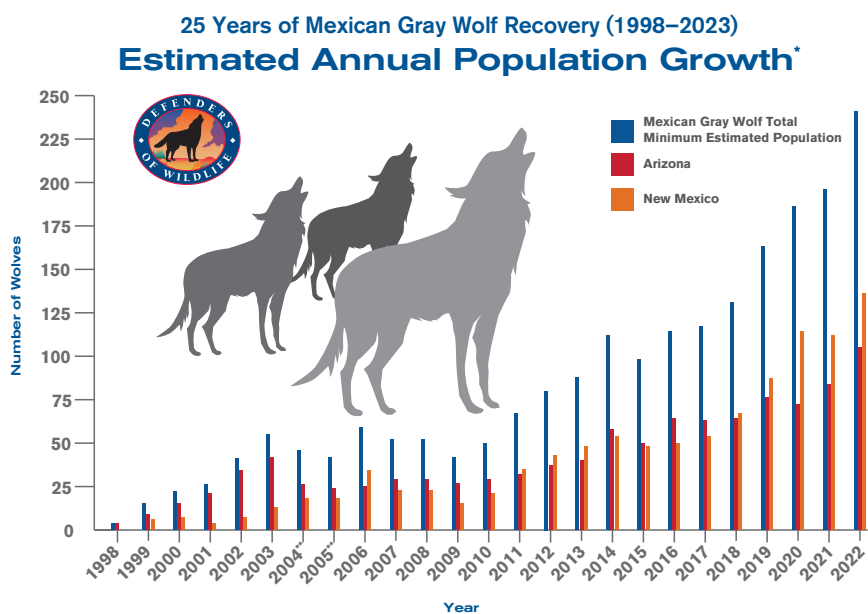
While this increase is good news, the Mexican gray wolf remains one of the most endangered mammals in North America with just this single population in the Blue Range of eastern Arizona and western New Mexico.

The best available science indicates that the recovery of the Mexican gray wolf requires at



least three connected populations totaling approximately 750 individuals, a carefully managed reintroduction effort that prioritizes improving the genetic health of the animals, and the establishment of at least two additional populations in the Southern Rockies and Grand Canyon regions.

While the growth of the Mexican gray wolf population offers hope for the species, we must do more to ensure its long-term viability. The species still struggles with inbreeding and restriction to a small percentage of the suitable habitat that remains in its historical range. Defenders will continue to work with scientists and policymakers to find the best path forward as the population continues to recover, and with tribal members and ranchers to implement proven techniques to keep wolves and livestock safe. 🐾



## Make the Gift of a Lifetime

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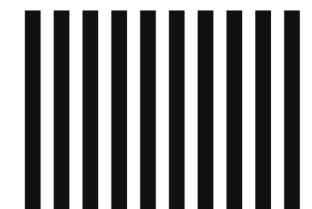
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## 50 Years of the Endangered Species Act

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Endangered Species Act (ESA), which has prevented the extinction of more than 95% of listed plants and animals since it was passed in 1973 with nearly unanimous bipartisan support. Species like the whooping crane, California condor and black-footed ferret had dwindled to populations in the low double digits before making significant comebacks, thanks to protections afforded by the ESA.

Despite its bipartisan origin and legacy of success, anti-wildlife politicians have repeatedly tried to undermine the ESA. Disappointingly, the new Congress is expected to be increasingly hostile toward conservation and the ESA. A Defenders analysis shows that Congress undercut the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s budget for the ESA by roughly 45% of the current need for the upcoming fiscal year.

Currently, more than 2,000 species of plants and animals are listed as threatened or endangered, ranging

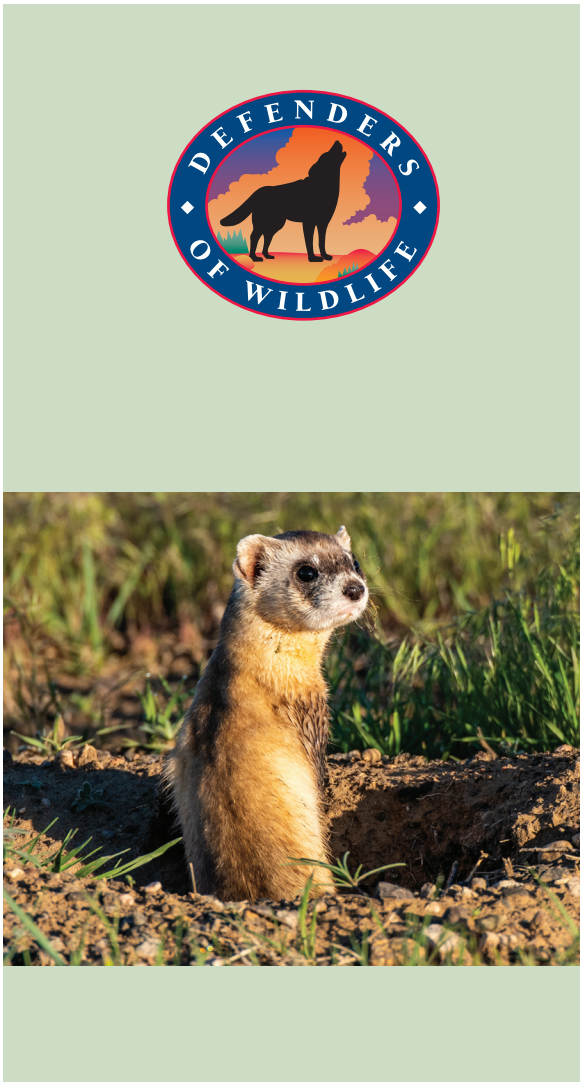


from the red wolf with a population of barely more than a dozen in the wild, to the lesser-known American burying beetle. In 2023, Defenders of Wildlife will honor the anniversary of this landmark law and draw attention to its importance, legacy of success and need to keep it strong and adequately funded. 🐾



**Defenders of Wildlife**  
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- I am considering including a gift to Defenders of Wildlife.






BLACK-FOOTED FERRET | © KERRY HARGROVE

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## *Inside this issue:*

-  *Protecting wildlife on the move*
-  *Good news for Mexican gray wolves*
-  *Endangered Species Act turns 50*