

# My Kingdom for a Crown

By Roland W. Kays

The first time my colleagues and I captured Bobby, an oversize ocelot, I knew he was the local king. At thirty-four pounds, he was the largest ocelot we had ever seen—and certainly the largest on Panama's Barro Colorado Island (BCI). It was clear he was a fighter, fresh from battle—and not against some easy, smaller prey, but with other, fearsome ocelots. These predators often rely on size and strong, sharp teeth to defend turf and establish social rank. Many of Bobby's battle wounds came from an ocelot's bites; he had tooth marks on his forehead, two punctures in his chest, and a deep gash across his left nostril. Ricardo S. Moreno, now a graduate student in wildlife ecology at the University of Costa Rica, was my trap-and-release partner that day. "I'd hate to see the other guy," he quipped.

Later that year Ricardo did see the other guy. Ricardo was out one night, radio-tracking a male ocelot some years younger than Bobby. Just as Ricardo crested a hill, he caught the very end of an ocelot fight. Bobby was standing unfazed in the middle of the trail, while "the other guy" was tumbling down a hillside. Then, with a glance back at the slack-jawed Ricardo, Bobby sauntered leisurely down the trail. The King was at the top of his game.

For the next two years we tracked Bobby with various equipment, old and new. He covered more than three and a half square miles on his nightly patrols—just over half the island. Once, we inadvertently caught Bobby in a trap intended for a puma, baited with a red brocket deer that we presumed had been killed by the puma the night before. Finding Bobby in



Stalking the forest at night, an ocelot searches for a meal (above). Turf battles with other ocelots or tussles with prey severely damaged Bobby's canine teeth (skull at right); the broken canines may have led to his demise.



the trap was a shock, but it did allow us to check his weight and replace his radio collar before its batteries ran down. We were stunned by his new weight: forty-one pounds. That made Bobby the largest ocelot in the world—now or ever, as far as we can determine from museum records and published studies.

Carnivores lead bloody lives, killing every time they need a snack. So it's no surprise their aggressions spill into their social lives as well. All fifteen ocelots we have captured on BCI have had battle scars, even the females; the worst case was a male that had lost his left ear. Most flesh wounds heal, but broken teeth—another fight casualty—do not. Canine teeth can break in fights with other ocelots, or while the animal is trying to catch prey, such as agoutis or sloths; broken teeth are common in all older carnivores. Not

only does a broken canine compromise defense, but it also makes it much harder to get the next meal. That may have been what led to Bobby's demise.

Three and a half years after our first encounter with Bobby, we found his rotting remains being pecked at by a king vulture. His canines were reduced to broken stubs with exposed-pulp cavities that held arteries and nerves. Ellis J. Neiburger, a forensic dentist based near Chicago, noted that Bobby's exposed pulp "would hurt and make this critter rather nasty in temperament." Certainly

his stubs would have done little for him in dominance battles. Bobby probably stumbled from his social throne before he ended up in the streambed where we found him dead.

I picked Bobby up, wrapped him in wire mesh, and buried his carcass under leaf litter to let the insects clean the bones. I realized that Bobby had claimed a special place in my memory with his ferocity and strength, even though some new animal had already claimed the role of top ocelot. But would the other BCI cats miss Bobby, or celebrate his reign? Apparently not. When I went back to retrieve his cleaned bones, I found that another ocelot had paid final respects . . . by depositing scat on top of Bobby's bones. It's not easy being king.

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