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Altiplano of Tarapaca:

Scientists of four countries go in search of the Andean cat

Almost never seen and estimated to number 1000 in the mountainous zone of Argentina, Bolivia, Chile and Peru.

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ARICA - Chilean, Bolivian, Argentine and Peruvian biologists are working at Salar de Surire, in the altiplano of the Region of Tarapaca, toward an almost impossible mission: to find an Andean cat, which presumably is the feline with the greatest risk of extinction in the world.

The cat (*Oreailurus jacobita*) inhabits an area of 620,000 square kilometers in the altiplano of Argentina, Bolivia, Chile and Peru, but only has been filmed once and photographed on four occasions.

Furthermore, the zoological collections of the entire world only contain five skulls.

The scientific expedition is part of a project planned for three years duration. The Wildlife Conservation Network, ecological organization of California, United States, invested US\$500,000 so that the scientists establish why the population is so scarce (only 1000 individuals), its habits of life and the keys to save this species.

Oreailurus Jacobita is a cat adapted to extreme climate. It inhabits between 3,000 and 4,400 meters elevation. It has a hyper developed ear with which to detect its prey, especially the agile and scarce chinchillas.

The biologist Agustin Iriarte heads the project in Chile. "We want this species to become a symbol of the altiplano", he said.

The cat has yellowish brown stripes on the sides and its torso is ash gray. It also has characteristic gray bands like a mask and a long ringed tail.

Amazon relative

On average, the male and female measure 93 and 63 centimeters, respectively. They weigh between 4 and 7 kilos, without considering its tail that occupies almost two thirds of its body and that it utilizes to roll up in, to keep warm and as a mattress to sleep.

The tail is a tool of equilibrium used to hunt its prey, including vizcachas, small rodents and wild birds.

Samples of DNA taken from skins indicate that it is not related with native felines (puma or colocolo, other wild cats that live at these altitudes), but with the tropical ocelot. The

Andean cat today is confined to mountainous plateaus, but the German naturalist Rodolfo Philippi described it in the hills of La Dehesa in 1891.

They are solitary and it is presumed that the males seek one or two females for procreation.

The idea is to capture individuals to fit them with electronic collars connected to GPS. It is a difficult task if you realize that a park ranger of CONAF, who spends his entire life in the field, might see it on 3 or 4 occasions. It is calculated that there is a specimen each thousand hectares.

Up to now, the scientists worked with feces that permitted an examination of its diet, but dream of repeating the experience of the German photographer Gunter Ziesler, who in 1988 photographed a young individual in Surire.

The only film was made by The Discovery Channel.

“Titi” and the bad luck

Why did its population diminish so drastically? Severino Lluncos Yusra, inhabitant of Caquena, indicates that if an Aymara passes in front of a wild cat and does not kill it, a year of bad luck happens unexpectedly.

Because of this it is frequent to find in a rural house in the localities of Nasahuento or Caquena as many as 15 skins of the almost extinct feline called "Titi" by the indigenous population.

The hunters exhibit the skins in celebrations like the one held every 24th of June - festival of the "Titi" – carried out in Putre.

Nevertheless, Agustin Iriarte indicates that the cause of its disappearance is also due to the indiscriminate hunt of chinchillas, a rodent of prized skin that is its principal source of food.