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September 2026

The Tilcayo Tiger Cat (Leopardus tilcayo Lescroart et al., 2026): A New Wildcat Species from Bolivia

Written by Norman Ali Bassam Khalaf-Prinz Sakerfalke von Jaffa

CHAPTERS

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Taxonomic Restructuring

After more than a century without a new wild cat species described for science in South America, the formal description of the Tilcayo Tiger Cat (Leopardus tilcayo Lescroart et al., 2026) in September 2026 marked a major milestone in mammalogy. Inhabiting the cloudy mountain forests of the Bolivian Yungas, this newly recognized feline emerged from a combination of targeted fieldwork and high-performance genetic analysis techniques applied to historical museum specimens, including skins, bones, and taxidermy samples. This comprehensive research successfully resolved decades of taxonomic ambiguity surrounding the complex "tiger cat" lineage.

The cryptic nature of small Neotropical felids has long complicated their classification, as visual morphology and field notes alone are often insufficient to distinguish between closely related taxa. Through advanced genomic sequencing led by researchers such as Paola Nogales-Ascarrunz and Jonas Lescroart, the genus Leopardus has now been reorganized into five distinct species: Leopardus guttulus (Southern Tigrina), Leopardus pardinoides (Clouded Tiger Cat), Leopardus tigrinus (Oncilla), Leopardus emiliae (Eastern Tigrina), and Leopardus tilcayo (Tilcayo Tiger Cat), alongside the Peruvian subspecies Leopardus tigrinus antisuyo (Antisuyo Tiger Cat).

Public awareness and scientific inquiry into this species were significantly catalyzed by a captive individual named "Tigrino". Initially rescued as a kitten in 2016 by a local family in Bolivia who mistook it for a domestic cat, the animal was later brought to the Senda Verde Wildlife Sanctuary around 2017 after exhibiting distinct wild hunting behaviors and vocalizations. Recognized by scientists as an unusual specimen that did not match standard northern tiger cat classifications, Tigrino represents the only known living specimen of Leopardus tilcayo in a controlled environment. Today, this species faces severe conservation challenges driven by mining, wildfires, and deforestation, prompting international research coalitions to deploy camera traps across the Yungas region to locate wild populations.

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