



Florida Panther Update

April 2012

Field Stories

Mama Said There Would Be Days Like This

By Mark Lotz, Panther Biologist, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC)

Whenever asked to explain how we catch a panther, I usually preface my response with, "Every capture is different." And it's true, a story could be written about every capture. While the basic approach is the same: find tracks, release hounds to chase the panther up a tree, dart it, and fit it with a radio-collar, there is always something interesting about each capture event. The capture of FP212, a three-year-old male at Okaloacoochee Slough State Forest (OK Slough, for short), is no exception.

As is customary when we're "hunting" in OK Slough, we were spread out across the forest; each scouting separate trails for fresh panther sign. On this chilly morning of February 13, Dave Onorato, FWC Associate Research Scientist, found the freshest kind of sign possible, a live panther walking south on Mustang Grade at about 8:20 a.m. He called our houndsmen, Roy and Cougar McBride, to put the dogs on the scent and the rest of us quickly gathered in anticipation of the impending capture. A good deal of time passed before we got that familiar call on the radio, with barking dogs in the background, indicating the panther was treed. Contrary to popular belief, it's actually quite difficult for dogs to trail a scent, no matter how fresh, on a bare, limerock road like Mustang Grade. Not until the panther stepped off the road into the brush where there was something for the scent to "catch on" were the dogs able to smell it. This panther had walked a long way on the grade before veering off-road.

We arrived at the tree disappointed to see that the panther had perched himself about forty-feet high near the top of a pine tree. Males don't often climb very high. I suspect that has to do with their size. However, FP212 had yet to reach his full potential weighing in at 114 pounds. The extreme height made for an unsafe capture so we decided to let him come down on his own and hopefully tree him again under safer circumstances. Often a panther will climb down as we're leaving the area. This was not one of those times. More than an hour passed before FP212 descended from his lofty retreat affording us the opportunity to set the dogs on his trail again. As hoped, the second tree was much more suitable: where he perched at only twenty feet. We stretched out our capture net in anticipation of catching him after the dart was launched, but he somehow managed to prop himself into a position where he wouldn't fall from the tree.

I strapped on my tree-climbing spikes and began scaling the skinny pine tree that was no bigger around than my leg. I could barely get even with the cat and did most of my work, like securing his safety rope, while positioned below him. The drugs had not yet taken full effect so FP212 was somewhat reactionary and retained some muscle rigidity. His sharp, extended claws had dug into the tree. I labored to pry those free and unhook an elbow from around a branch. Because the tree was so small and there were no branches to loop the rope over to act as a fulcrum, I clipped the rope through a carabiner on my climbing belt and dropped the other end down to the crew on the ground. Once the panther is tied off, someone on the ground actually lowers the panther.

As I hoisted the panther free and began lowering him into position where the ground crew could take control of his descent,



"He pretty much ruined my work pants; but he's not too torn up over it," commented biologist Mark Lotz while holding FP212 (shown anesthetized).

Photo by Dave Onorato

his extended claws snagged onto my pants near the front pocket. The front claws of a panther, or any cat for that matter, are curved in such a way that makes them perfect tools for grabbing and holding onto prey. They are almost like a circle hook used in fishing that sets itself. Not much pressure is needed for the claws to dig into something. As the panther descended, the rip in my pants expanded. Obviously the rip-stop material our work pants are supposed to be made of was never tested on panthers. Once I shimmied to the ground I realized that my underwear had also been torn, but fortunately the leg escaped unscathed. By now the temperature had warmed up and the foot-long garment gash I was sporting wasn't too uncomfortable, except for the fact that part of my underwear was exposed to everyone there. Good thing this wardrobe malfunction wasn't captured on live TV, but no embarrassment really; I faithfully follow my mother's advice to always wear clean underwear in case of an accident.

BCNP Completes 2012 Panther Capture Season

By Roxann Hanson, Volunteer, Florida Panther NWR

Photos by Ralph Arwood, Volunteer, Big Cypress National Preserve

Panther biologist, Deborah Jansen of Big Cypress National Preserve reported their 2012 panther capture season ended on March 11. "The team searched for panthers for 28 days between February 9 and March 11 and handled seven individual panthers."



Female FP199, treed by hounds on the first day of capture season, February 9.

©Ralph Arwood

This year's BCNP capture efforts are summarized as follows:

- Four new panthers were collared: two males (FP211, FP216) and two females (FP199 and FP214).
- One female with a functioning collar was recollared: FP180.
- Two cats that had failed collars were recollared: FP153, and FP175.
- Three panthers were treed, but not handled for safety reasons: FP162 (treed twice) and two uncollared panthers, a male and a female.



K345, 346, and 347 on February 16: three of several kittens handled at BCNP since the first of the year. ©Ralph Arwood



Specialized hunting dog, "Peanut", at a panther capture. BCNP's policy is to cross-train all capture team members. Peanut had to learn other jobs. ©Ralph Arwood

Newsflash At 10:30 a.m. Saturday, March 31 a motorcycle traveling west on Florida Highway 41 struck a panther on the west side of Trail Lakes Campground in BCNP. Witnesses claimed the panther lay in the road after being hit and was believed to be dead. But shortly thereafter it got up and ran into woods on the south side of the highway. The motorcyclist was wearing a helmet and survived after being transported to Naples Hospital for treatment of injuries. BCNP staff were notified Sunday, April 1, and began their search for the panther around noon with a leashed hound. They were unable to detect panther presence and it is not known yet if the panther survived.

Notices and Links

April 11 Friends of the Florida Panther Annual Meeting. Join the Friends on Wednesday, April 11 at 6p.m. at the Clive Daniel Home in Naples for an exciting presentation about the current Florida panther research being conducted at the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge to study deer and other prey for panthers. Captivating images will be shared by David Shindle and Larry Richardson from more than seventy field cameras in their study, including rare images and video of panther behavior and unexpected visitors! For more information and to RSVP: www.floridapanther.org

March 13, the 2010-11 **Interagency Florida Panther Response Team Report**, summarizing human-panther interactions investigated by the Interagency Florida Panther Response Team between July 1, 2010 and June 30, 2011, was released. The pdf file is downloadable from the following two sources:

www.fws.gov/verobeach/20120313InteragencyFloridaPantherResponseTeamReportReleased.html
www.floridapanther.net.org/index.php/news/item/1968

March 16, NBC2 posted a video story entitled, "**Panther attacks on pets up in Collier.**"
www.nbc-2.com/story/17177700/2012/03/16/panther-attacks-up-in-collier

In mid-March the FWC released a series of **trail-cam photos taken of K334 and K335 at White Oak Conservation Center.**
www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.130796333348.106251.90492003348&type=1

Florida Panther Update Partnership This newsletter is made possible through the efforts of the following agencies:

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) www.floridapanther.net.org

Big Cypress National Preserve (BCNP) www.nps.gov/bicy

Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge (FPNWR) www.fws.gov/floridapanther



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