



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Florida Panther *Update*

Field Stories

July 2011

Panther Den between a Rock and a Hard Place to Find

Story and Photos by Ralph Arwood, Volunteer, Big Cypress National Preserve (BCNP)

At over 729,000 acres, Big Cypress National Preserve is a vast expanse with many difficult areas to access. FP151's latest kitten den, discovered on June 10, was situated in one of those remote places. First handled at her natal den in April of 2002 as K113; the daughter of FP93 and FP79 (Texas cougar direct offspring - Don Juan), FP151 has always been a powerful and independent cat. So it was no surprise that her den would be a challenge to get to. She first distinguished herself from other panthers when we collared her in February of 2007. At almost five years of age and weighing ninety pounds, she proved to have a very high tolerance to our anesthetic drugs. FP151 denned unsuccessfully twice that year losing her second litter to a bear. She denned again in 2008 but her radio collar failed, so we lost contact with her and her two kittens.

On October 28, 2010 houndsman Roy McBride was out exercising his dogs when they treed FP151, giving us the chance to replace her failed radio collar and subsequently handle her June 2011 litter.

Fortunately, when it was time for the BCNP panther research team to visit the den and mark the new kittens, the National Park Service helicopter was available to take us to the den. This assured that we would arrive before FP151 returned from her search for prey. Plus we were spared a long and bumpy buggy ride to the site. Turned out that was the only hardship we were spared. At my assigned starting point I was facing an eight foot high wall of palmettos, tightly packed with thorny smilax vines and hog plum. FP151 sure had picked a good place for her den. It was impossible to walk through this terrain. The only way in was to crawl on hands and knees, hoping that I could find the small passageways that mom used to creep through to her den. As the palmetto leaves crunched around me, I couldn't help but wonder if that clatter didn't function as an "alarm" against intruders for this panther family. During the search we found something interesting: a flattened area that FP151 had probably spent some time at but there were no kittens. This was likely a place where she could rest near, but not with, her kittens. Finally I came upon a less dense area and, following this slightly easier line of travel, arrived at FP151's den. It was a cool and shadowy cave under the foliage, shaped like an "L". At the bend of the "L" was an outcropping of limestone rock. And there, partially hidden under the ledge, was a panther kitten! Nearby was the second kitten, sleeping between two palmetto trunks.

FP151's den was typical of most dens in South Florida in that it was located in a drier, upland area, within very dense palmetto vegetation. It was atypical in that it featured a rocky section for the kitten to hide in. While pumas living in mountainous terrain out west usually locate dens in a shallow nook on the face of a cliff or rock outcrop, Florida panthers do not normally enjoy that option. It seemed fitting that FP151's kitten, descendent of a Texas cougar, would naturally take advantage of this rocky cover.



FP151 in 2007 before Her First Capture



FP151's Kitten Securely Tucked under a Rock Ledge

Hit and Run Panthers

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

You're driving to work in the morning. The sun has just peaked over the horizon. The light is diffused but it's still plenty bright enough to see. You've driven this route hundreds of times without incident so your mind wanders as the radio plays. Suddenly something darts into your peripheral vision and you realize an animal is about to run in front of your car. You react in an instant, slamming on your brakes while maintaining control of your vehicle. You think it looks like a panther but it can't be. They're nocturnal, right? Although time seems to have slowed down as you processed all this information, in reality only 1.4 seconds have passed and before you know it, BAM! You just hit a panther.

To view a video of two puma kittens living in a rocky den in the Grand Canyon National Park, visit the following website:
www.nps.gov/grca/naturescience/200710mtlionkit.htm

Scenarios similar to this occurred twice in June with uncollared panthers. The first incident took place on June 8 on CR833 east of Okaloacoochee Slough State Forest in Hendry County around 6:30 am. Photographs and hair from the scene confirmed a panther was involved in this accident. The second case happened on Corkscrew Road east of the Wild Cat Run development in Lee County at 7:00 pm almost a week later on June 14. Despite searches of the area no physical evidence could be found to confirm the report a panther had been hit. But what made these collisions unique was that the panther(s) survived the initial blow.

Not every panther struck by a vehicle dies. Sometimes they are only injured. The extent of those injuries varies depending on what part of the body was impacted and the driver's reaction, such as slowing down or swerving to avoid the collision. Wild animals are pretty tough individuals and in many cases are capable of recovering from their wounds. Life in the wild is fraught with ordeals especially for carnivores that must capture other animals in order to survive. Sometimes panthers sustain injuries like being gored with hog tusks or deer antlers. They will also suffer broken bones while capturing prey. Male panthers are especially prone to incur wounds, some of them pretty severe, while battling over territory and breeding rights. However inconvenient and temporarily debilitating, panthers are often able to recover from the injuries they acquire throughout their life. Therefore, in order to give an injured panther the best possible chance to recuperate, they usually must simply be left alone. Wild animals do not find comfort in human touch or environments. Bringing a panther into a captive situation can result in complications to that individual's recovery process such as added stress or additional injuries incurred from fighting the enclosure.

Because these hit panthers were able to leave the area under their own power before biologists arrived, we decided to allow them to recover on their own. Experience with radio collared panthers

that had survived collisions in the past made us confident with our decision.

Accidentally hitting a panther with your vehicle is not a crime and we encourage anyone involved to please report it promptly. Panthers have been successfully rehabilitated and released in the past after suffering injuries from vehicle strikes. Deceased panthers are important for evaluating recovery efforts too. Samples collected from deceased panthers allow us to gather information on population health and genetic structure. Remember, although Florida panthers are generally crepuscular by nature (active at dawn and dusk), they can be active at any time of day. One should always be alert for animals and keep vehicle speed in check while driving through natural areas. To report dead or injured panthers call the toll free FWC hotline at 888-404-FWCC (3922).



Vehicle Damage after Collision with a Panther. Private security officer Eddie L. Henderson reported, "The woman was traveling south on CR 833 when she hit the panther. The impact threw the panther onto the shoulder of the road and into the ditch. The panther then moved from the bottom of the ditch and lay down next to the fence. When the panther was approached, he moved west under some trees in the horse lot."

Notices and Links

For updates on **all June panther births and mortalities** visit FWC's Panther Pulse: www.floridapanther.net.org/index.php/pulse/ "**Protect The Panther - Buy A Florida Panther Specialty Plate.**" The FWC has produced a new video to promote the sale of the Florida panther specialty license plate emphasizing the fact that panther research and management is funded solely by citizens that purchase these plates. www.youtube.com/watch?v=5gSM3uh15aY&feature=share

In June NBC2 released a video entitled, "**Panther Blamed for Multiple Farm Kills**" describing a panther depredation incident and homeowners concerns with panthers. www.nbc-2.com/video?clipId=5929686&flvUri=&partnerclipid=&topVideoCatNo=0&c=&autoStart=true&activePane=info&LaunchPageAdTag=homepage&clipFormat=flv

On June 9, One Earth published an article by **Kim Tingley** entitled, "**The Cats Came Back**" addressing how the Florida panther has leapt back from the brink, but not everyone is so thrilled about it. www.onearth.org/article/the-cats-came-back

On June 12, the St. Petersburg Times published a story about the **captive panther kitten, K304** by Craig Pittman entitled, "Orphaned Florida Panther Will Graduate from White Oak Plantation to Prowling Wild." www.tampabay.com/news/environment/wildlife/article1174879.ece

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

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

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