



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Florida Panther *Update*

## Field Stories

August 2011

### A Sight, in Flight, to Behold!

Article by Annette Johnson, Wildlife Technician, Big Cypress National Preserve (BCNP)

In order to collect location data on radio-collared Florida panthers for research within Big Cypress National Preserve, National Park Service wildlife staff takes to the air three times a week to conduct aerial radio telemetry monitoring. One of us meets the pilot at the Oasis Visitor Center airstrip and rigs up a Cessna 172 fixed-wing aircraft with telemetry gear. An antenna is mounted to each wing strut. Both are connected to a receiver and switch box inside the plane. The flight typically lasts around three hours, starting anywhere from 7:30 AM to 3:30 PM depending upon weather conditions. Speed Aviation, Inc., headquartered in Vero Beach, has been working with us for 14 years to supply both pilot and plane.



*View of a Panther from the Sky: FP124, July 2006. (Aircraft Shadow Appears on the Lower Left) Photo by Deborah Jansen*



*Cessna 172 on a June 3, 2010 Telemetry Flight. (Note antenna attached to strut) Photo by Ralph Arwood*

We first fly to the general location of an individual panther's home range. Each panther's radio-collar transmits a beeping signal on a frequency that is unique and beyond both the panther's and our hearing capabilities without the aid of a receiver. To pick up each signal, we tune in the receiver to its distinct frequency. This is akin to how you select your favorite station on the car radio. We then pin down and record the panther's location using a "switch box" which enables us to isolate the signal coming from either the right or left antenna attached to the strut of the aircraft.

Members of our staff are often asked if they can actually see panthers during a flight. We do see them, and of course, spotting one of the big cats on the ground becomes the highlight of any flight. Over the past 18 months, we've completed 215 telemetry flights, collected 1729 panther locations, and have had 44 "visuals" of panthers from the plane. That's roughly one sighting for every 39 panther locations, or one sighting in every 4.8 flights.

When one is seen, it's always exciting and an immensely rewarding feeling for both the pilot and wildlife staff, something along the line of hitting a home run. The pilot will briefly circle the area, so we can observe what habitat the panther is utilizing, what behavior it is engaged in, and if it is accompanied by any other panthers.

In the past year and a half, we have had seven sightings of collared panthers with kittens (birth to six months) or juveniles (six months to dispersal at 14 -18 months). Now that's a home run with the bases loaded!

Panther family sightings are especially significant because usually our staff previously handled the kittens at two to three weeks of age in the mother's den. A visual of a family from the plane gives us an indication of how many kittens from the den survived to the present point in time. This information is invaluable in determining overall panther kitten survival such as in this recent study by Hostetler et al, published in 2010: [www.wec.ufl.edu/faculty/olim/Hostetler et al 2010 FP kitten survival BiolConservation.pdf](http://www.wec.ufl.edu/faculty/olim/Hostetler%20et%20al%202010%20FP%20kitten%20survival%20BiolConservation.pdf)

Sometimes deer running in a prairie will be a clue for us to focus in on an area because there may be a Florida panther close behind. Watching a panther chase deer is truly a sight to behold, and we've seen this three times in the past 18 months. It's life playing out before you, but unlike in baseball, both panther and deer are literally running for their lives.

### Duped by a Panther

By Deborah Jansen, Wildlife Biologist, Big Cypress National Preserve

When the BCNP panther team caught Florida panther #180 on February 21, 2010, we knew her age, having handled her as a kitten two years earlier. We sometimes refer to her as "Blondie" because when we handled her as K264 she had distinctly lighter-colored fur. She was expected to den anytime, but that didn't happen until early March of this year when she was three years old. We set up the den box, yet by the end of the month monitoring via both the box and flights showed that she was not returning to the den. Her subsequent flight locations also showed no pattern which would indicate that she was returning to care for the kittens. We checked the den and found beds where she had lain, but, no sign of the kittens. We theorized that something

had happened to them, and chalked it up to FP180's inexperience since this was her first litter.

What a surprise when Annette called from her July 8<sup>th</sup> flight reporting that she had seen FP180 in a cypress prairie with TWO KITTENS walking behind her! Even after mapping and reviewing the flight locations from March to July, we could not figure out where she had moved those kittens. For the past ten years, the Big Cypress panther team has located over thirty dens without a miss. But FP180 managed to elude us. We may yet discover how she did it because she is wearing a GPS collar. The collar stores five locations a day and, when we retrieve it next February, we may learn her wily ways.



*Right: FP180 scrutinizing her captors on February 21, 2010 in the Deep Lake Unit of BCNP.  
Photo by Ralph Arwood*

## Notices and Links



**Billboard on US41 in Lee County promotes Florida panther conservation message** (see above). The US Fish and Wildlife Service issued a press release on July 13 entitled, "Southwest Florida Ad Agency Donates Digital Billboard Space in Lee County to Help Conservation Groups with Florida Panther Recovery Efforts". [www.floridapanther.net.org/index.php/news/item/1908](http://www.floridapanther.net.org/index.php/news/item/1908)

Dave Onorato of the FWC reported that the remains of an approximately six-year-old radiocollared male panther, FP156, were collected on July 29 in the Belle Meade portion of the Picayune Strand State Forest in Collier County. This is the third death in July and the **20th panther mortality for 2011**. For details visit FWC's Panther Pulse: [www.floridapanther.net.org/index.php/pulse](http://www.floridapanther.net.org/index.php/pulse)

Hear FWC biologist **Mark Lotz's** comments on the subject of recent mortalities and the Florida panther population in a July 13 interview with Donna Green-Townsend of WUFT-FM. [www.wuftp.com/news/index.php?id=1183](http://www.wuftp.com/news/index.php?id=1183)

**Panther Sighting:** Photographer Chris R. Little finally got his chance to see a wild Florida panther on July 18, in the Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park. [www.flickr.com/photos/66122340@N00/5961896218](http://www.flickr.com/photos/66122340@N00/5961896218)

**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](http://www.floridapanther.net.org)

**Big Cypress National Preserve (BCNP)** [www.nps.gov/bicy](http://www.nps.gov/bicy)

**Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge (FPNWR)** [www.fws.gov/floridapanther](http://www.fws.gov/floridapanther)



**Past Update Issues:** [www.floridapanther.org/newsletter.html](http://www.floridapanther.org/newsletter.html) **Contact us:** [floridapanther@fws.gov](mailto:floridapanther@fws.gov)

*Updates are Compiled and Distributed by Roxann Hanson, FPNWR Volunteer*