



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Florida Panther *Update*

Field Stories

September 2011

FP113's Den: an Atypical State of Affairs

Story and Photos by Mark Lotz, Panther Biologist, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC)

On August 7, Dave Onorato, FWC Associate Research Scientist, and I marked one female kitten at the den of FP113. Many factors made this kitten work-up a memorable affair. It was this panther's second birthing in five months, FP113 displayed irregular movement patterns while denning, she repeatedly interfered (unintentionally) with attempts to enter the den, and at about four-weeks-old, the kitten was a handful.

A Second Birthing: If all goes well, a female panther raises her young to dispersal age (between 12 and 24 months) before mating again. FP113 gave birth earlier this year in March and then again in July. In March we marked a single male kitten just north of the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge boundary. However, she lost that kitten for unknown reasons a few weeks after we handled it. Photos from cameras placed very near the den site revealed a black bear following behind FP113 within a minute of her passing the camera one night. This led some to speculate the bear may have had something to do with the kitten's disappearance. Another possible explanation is an event known as infanticide, where male panthers kill kittens in order to sire their own offspring with the female. This happens in other puma populations and has been speculated to occur in the Florida population as well. Although no male panthers were captured on nearby cameras, FP113 became pregnant soon after losing her kitten and again gave birth in July.

Variable Movement Patterns While Denning: It took a few weeks to figure out FP113 had in fact denned again because of her attendance during flight times (we typically fly over her home range around 7:40 am). Initially we thought she had denned, but several successive flights indicated she was not at the suspected den site. Finally we confirmed her location once more at the site that first peaked our curiosity. This now warranted an investigation. On August 3, we went north of the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge near Pistol Pond, pinpointed her location, and set up the "biologist-in-a-box" to monitor her attendance at the site. Interestingly it was along the same boundary fence line, about a quarter mile from her previous den.

FP113 Running Interference: The next morning, before sunrise on August 4, she was gone so we headed out there. We met at our ATVs which were stationed on the refuge



With a Secure Yet Gentle Hold on Robust Four-Week-Old K342, Dave Onorato Administers the Dewormer Medication. (FWC Photo)

and called the box only to find that FP113 had already returned. On this, and the next two mornings, the panther mom returned to her den before we could begin our work. She seemed to prefer the night hunts when it's cooler and return right at or just after sunrise. On the second morning, I met FP113 face-to-face along the trail while on foot returning to the ATV. We saw each other at the same time. We both stopped and then I sauntered to the side hoping she would keep moving toward me; but she didn't. She stepped off the trail and stopped about twenty feet in to observe and wait. I couldn't see her through the vegetation. I'm sure she was in a position to see me though.

Finally, on the fourth try, FP113 remained away well past sunrise allowing us the opportunity to search for the den. We found several "day bed" sites; none of them containing kittens. Panthers usually move their den every week or two depending on how messy they get. Curiously, these sites looked like they'd been used only two days each at most. I thought, "Maybe she's getting picky in her old age and wants those fresh linens every day."

Because the kittens were now about four-weeks-old they were quite mobile and moved out of the den site when they heard us searching through the palmettos. After 45 minutes of searching I finally discovered a little panther kitten butt poking out from a clump of pine needles that it had tried to burrow under. So on August 7th, this little female became K342. We continued to search the area but

did not find any other kittens. Further research, through tracking or camera surveys, may reveal the existence of other kittens.

Panther Kitten Size XL: As mentioned, K342 was much older because of mom's movements leading to a late start in her capture. Our standard operating procedure is to pinpoint the den as soon as we suspect a panther is denning and get the box set up immediately. That maximizes the number of chances available to handle the kittens at a young age. Two weeks of age is the ideal time to "work-up" a panther kitten. As they get older they become more mobile and more difficult to handle. We noted how well developed the teeth were on this older kitten and took photos. Panther kitten teeth will come in rather quickly and they lose their baby (or "deciduous") teeth when about eight months old. Although tiny, K342's canines were still sharp. She nipped at Dave one time and drew blood with those teeny little things. Small teeth, small puncture, so no worries. But still, her future capabilities are there!



K342 sports these canines however she is still nursing. Kittens begin weaning at around two months of age. A panther mom does not bring food to the den. Once kittens are ready, she will lead them to a kill where they begin the weaning process which may last a few months. (FWC Photo)

Notices and Links

Celebrate the Florida panther by attending the **First Annual Florida Panther Festival on Saturday, October 29 at North Collier Regional Park**. The Festival (free admission) runs from 10am to 4pm. Field trips are offered the day before on Friday, October 28 at various locations (fees apply for field trips). For more information, call 239.353.8442, ext. 222 or email floridapantherfestival@gmail.com. www.floridapantherfestival.com

Proceedings of the 10th Mountain Lion Workshop, "Cougars: Conservation, Connectivity and Population Management" which was held May 2-5, 2011 in Bozeman, Montana, are now available on-line as a pdf download. Various topics are covered addressing wild felid (including the Florida panther) management issues in the Americas. <http://fwpiis.mt.gov/content/getItem.aspx?id=51876>

The **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced on August 24, the sentencing of a hunter** in United States District Court, Northern District of Georgia, who pled guilty to the unlawful take of a Florida panther. www.fws.gov/southeast/news/2011/11-057.html

On August 17, **Sierra Magazine released on-line, "Panther at the Crossroads: Without Room to Roam, Florida's Big Cats Are Roadkill Waiting to Happen,"** by Tristram Korten | Illustration and map by Javier Zarracina www.sierraclubfloridanews.org/2011/08/panther-at-crossroads-septemberoctober.html



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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