



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Florida Panther *Update*

Field Stories

October 2011

FP188's Orphaned Kittens: Search and Rescue

by Marc Criffield, Panther Research, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC)

On September 14th, when Florida Panther 188's collar was detected in mortality, we were very concerned. Only months earlier, in May, we had entered her den and processed her litter of three kittens: two males and a female. If their mother was now in fact deceased, they would be orphans at the age of four-and-a-half months. Without the care of their mother, these animals were too young to be able to survive in the wild.

We found and recovered the carcass of FP188 on an orange grove in northern Collier County. Having verified the death of the mother, our focus turned quickly to her kittens. In the past, we have successfully captured other panther kittens, kept them in captivity at White Oak Conservation Center with minimal human contact, and then released them back into the wild once old enough to survive. We were looking to replicate our past successes. Remote-sensing cameras and cage traps were promptly set up. The team scoured the area on foot looking for sign of the trio, wondering if the kittens were still alive, or if they had perished from the rigors of their environment. If they were still alive, were they traveling with their mother when she died, or had she stashed the siblings in a place she deemed safe before meeting her fate?

Over the next few mornings, the traps failed to ensnare any kittens and the remote cameras could only yield images of the usual suspects: opossums, raccoons, hogs, deer, vultures, turkey and a bobcat. So the traps were removed, but the remote cameras continued to monitor.

We finally caught a break on Thursday, September 22 when one remote camera turned out photos of two panther kittens! They looked thin but alert as they paused in their travels to investigate the camera. We also came across a tiny patch of sand which had captured a few small kitten footprints overnight at the water retention area where FP188 had lain dead. A few more tracks revealed where the pair traveled through the retention area we were monitoring and exited into the surrounding orange grove.

As recommended by our houndsmen, Roy and Cougar McBride, we decided to give the traps a chance to catch the kittens overnight before we tracked them with dogs. Trapping is far preferable to chasing weak kittens with hounds because of the inherent risk of injury to the panther kittens. Still, if we failed to trap them, we would have to consider using hounds because these orphans would die without the protection of their mother regardless.

As luck would have it, the next morning one of our traps contained two of the three young panther siblings! The kittens huddled passively in the back of the trap while we discussed where and how to move them. While four of us transferred the kittens from the trap to a crate for travel, they transformed into feisty, spitting, fifteen-pound hell-cats! We were glad to see their spirited attitudes because it indicated that they were in good condition after two weeks of fending for themselves.



Above: The orphaned kittens of FP188 gaze out from a cage trap as they await transport to White Oak Conservation Center. The traps were baited with raw hog meat: likely the first meal they had eaten in days. All that was left were the bones in the bottom of the trap. (Photo by Erin Myers)

Below: Kitten Air Evacuation: Rear cabin of the aircraft being prepared for loading a wooden crate containing the two young panthers. (Photo by David Shindle)



Big Cypress National Preserve volunteer, Ralph Arwood, provided transportation for the kittens in his private aircraft to White Oak Conservation Center in Yulee, Florida. White Oak has been a long-time panther conservation partner and has helped care for and rehabilitate many panthers since the mid-1980's including seven kittens. To simulate the most natural setting possible, the kittens will be housed out of view of people, not handled by White Oak staff, and will be left alone for a week or so to give them time to gain strength and weight. As a result, we have not yet discovered which two kittens from the litter were captured. FP188 gave birth to three kittens, two males and a female, which were marked with transponder chips at the den. When these kittens are anesthetized and given their examination, they will be scanned for the chips and their identities will be determined. White Oak will be their home for the next seven months to one year, depending on their readiness for life back in the wild.

Although two kittens have been found, the trapping effort and camera monitoring has continued in hopes of determining the fate of the third kitten. If the third kitten was alive, it would likely have been on the heels of its siblings, and we would have seen pictures of it on one of the several remote cameras or captured it immediately in the other traps. In the wild, rarely do all kittens of larger litters (>2) survive to adulthood, and there is a

good possibility that only two of the three kittens left the natal den. But we consider recovering two of the three a great success. And, of course, we look forward to assisting them back into the wild within the next year!

Addendum

On Monday, October 3, FWC and White Oak staff determined (via the transponder chips) that the rescued kittens were K334 and K335: a female weighing 20 pounds and a male weighing 25 pounds. They were anesthetized and given a full examination now that they had recovered for over a week and had gained a significant amount of weight after eating several good meals. They were dewormed, treated for ticks and vaccinated against several diseases. The kittens recovered well in a secluded pen and will be transferred to a larger pen in a month.

K336, the last missing kitten, has not been found and is presumed dead. It has been over three weeks since the kitten's mother died, and it is unlikely he survived this long without her. Sadly, we turned off the cameras and ended the vigil for him.



K334 and K335, safe and gaining strength at White Oak Conservation Center. (Photo by Karen Meeks)

Notices and Links

Announcements

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

On October 6, the FWC released their "**Annual Report on the Research and Management of Florida Panthers: 2010-2011**". www.floridapanthernet.org/index.php/reports/issue/1930/

Defenders of Wildlife's Habitat for Highways program initiated "Watch Out for Wildlife Awareness Week" to raise awareness about the immense effect roads and vehicle collisions have on wildlife and contacted all governors to request that they declare the third week of September as such. Governor Rick Scott's proclamation can be found on: www.defenders.org/resources/publications/programs_and_policy/habitat_conservation/habitat_and_highways/wow_proclamation_florida.pdf

Videos and Articles

On September 1, NBC Channel 2 Reported on panther attacks in Golden Gate Estates. The video By Paul Gessler, entitled "**Panther Attacks Golden Gate Goats**" is available on-line. www.nbc-2.com/story/15379347/panther-attacks-golden-gate-goats

On September 7, Naples Daily News published a story/video by Kristine Gill entitled, "**Panther Growth Celebrated: But How Many Can Area Support?**" Nick Wiley, executive director and other members from the FWC spoke at the Naples Zoo about the importance of working with landowners in the future as growing panther population gives way to depredation. www.naplesnews.com/news/2011/sep/07/panther-growth-celebrated-how-many-can-area-support

On September 8, MyFWCvideos released a video on YouTube entitled, "**Panther Project: How We Collar a Florida Panther**" www.youtube.com/watch?v=EvNphm7VQn4

On September 22 Tampa Bay's My FOX posted a video and article by Cynthia Smoot entitled, "**Panthers Fight to Survive in Dwindling Habitat: Residents at Edge of Habitat Describe Run-Ins**". www.myfoxtampabay.com/dpp/news/state/panthers-fight-to-survive-in-dwindling-habitat-09222011

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

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

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



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