

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Florida Panther *Update*

Field Stories

May 2011

Panther Kitten Double Rescue

Because the panther population in the state of Florida is so low (between 100 and 160 adults) every animal counts, and K304 is no exception. This fortunate panther kitten boy has been lifted out of harm's way by human hands not once, but twice already in his short life. In the month of his first birthday we present his story.....

Part I: A Ticket to White Oak

By John Kellam, Big Cypress National Preserve (BCNP) Biologist

It's never a good sign when Annette Johnson calls unexpectedly during a routine panther flight. On October 25, 2010, she reported that FP102's collar was beeping fast, which is the mortality mode that kicks in when a panther hasn't moved for two hours. We headed to the site and found the remains of FP102, a female who had given birth to two male kittens only five months earlier. The subsequent necropsy confirmed that she had died from wounds received during a fight. On the day we retrieved her, we found kitten tracks about a half mile from the site. At five months of age, a panther kitten cannot survive on its own. Consequently, we set up baited trail camera stations at the mortality site in hopes of finding evidence of FP102's offspring. The trail cameras recorded images of a bear, an adult male panther, raccoons, and opossums, but no panther kittens.

Our next approach was to use hounds, so houndsman Cougar McBride hunted on October 30 and treed a very scrawny, sixteen-pound panther kitten. Once darted with a sedation drug, the kitten was easily captured and given a cursory exam to check for any obvious injuries. None were found. Next the kitten was given rehydrating IV fluids, since it had not eaten for several days. A pit-tag scanner quickly identified the kitten as K304, who was soon quietly resting in a cage during his swamp buggy ride out of the swamp and on his journey into Naples to the veterinarian office of Dr. John Lanier. Although K304 was thin, he was determined to be in good health and Dr. Lanier administered more IV fluids, deworming medicine, and had blood drawn to further assess his health.



*Orphaned K304 at Capture on October 30, 2010.
Photo by Ralph Arwood*



In Flight to White Oak, the BCNP Team Lifts the Cover on K304's Cage to Check on His Status. Photo by Ralph Arwood

Since there had been two kittens at FP102's den, the area was searched again after K304's capture for additional tracks and hunted again by the houndsman. No second kitten (K303) was found; however, it is possible that K303 died prior to FP102's death.

Ralph Arwood, photographer and pilot, along with Dr. Lanier, Annette and Ralph's wife Gisella, flew K304 to White Oak Conservation Center, a 7,000-acre (650 acres developed) wildlife breeding, research, and training facility in northeast Florida. K304 was first housed in a one-half-acre pen. When he topped 50 pounds, he was released into a ten-acre enclosure. His handling always involved minimal human contact. Both live and dead prey are placed in the pen to teach him to hunt on his own. The goal is to keep him wild enough for release back into Big Cypress sometime this summer.



Five-Month-Old K304 at White Oak Conservation Center, November 2, 2010. Photo by Karen Ziegler-Meeks

Panther Kitten Double Rescue

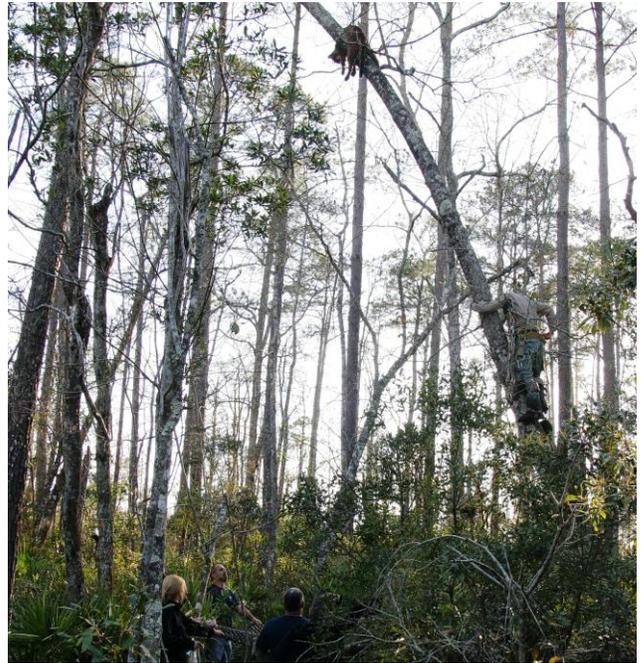
Part II: Spring Break at Panther U

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

Most students look forward to the freedoms of spring break: being released from the confines of their learning institution and allowed to “go wild”. Panther kitten #304 enjoyed his own four-day version of this in late February. He was nine months old (a panther teenager), growing up in northeast Florida at White Oak Conservation Center, busy honing his survival skills. K304’s “boarding school” was a ten-acre, fenced-in natural area with so much vegetation that most of the time his keepers could not see him. Most of his activity could be monitored via remote cameras placed inside the pen.

Spring “break-out” for K304 started around February 25 when a tree fell on his enclosure. The branches hanging over the fence were something new for him to investigate and also provided a convenient “ladder” for climbing out of his “cage”. Luckily, his radio collar indicated he had not traveled far. Gates on the enclosure were left open in the event that K304 might decide to wander back to familiar territory. But his radio-collar signal and lack of tracks on the sandy roads criss-crossing White Oak’s vast grounds indicated K304 had found himself a comfortable new spot to “hang out”. Because cage traps offer the safest alternative for capture, they were set for two nights; but to no avail. K304 remained on holiday.

On Tuesday March 1, houndsman Cougar McBride was again called into action. He brought one of his trusty old dogs, Chile (the same one involved with K304’s first rescue), and treed the cat about twenty feet up a slanted maple. Passed out (also not uncommon for spring breakers), the young male was suspended on a branch after being darted. So I shimmied up and dropped him into the net, steadied by numerous hands (mostly White Oak staff) below. Only about thirty minutes had passed from the time K304 was darted until he was back in his holding pen. The damaged fence has since been repaired and our “party animal” is now back in his enclosure learning how to capture prey.



Above: Mark Lotz Scales a Maple Tree to Release K304 into the Capture Net Held by White Oak Staff. Photo by Karen Ziegler-Meeks **Below:** K304 Roams his White Oak Enclosure, One Month After the Escape. Trail Cam Photo



Notices and Links

Remember the perfect paw print from last month’s Florida Panther Update issue? **A panther was recently found killed by gunshot** in that same area, Seminole County. **Officials are offering a \$5,000 reward.** The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s (USFWS) Ken Warren issued a press release on April 26: myfwc.com/news/news-releases/2011/april/26/reward Read an article here: www.news-journalonline.com/news/outdoors/environment/2011/04/26/officials-look-for-clues-in-panther-shooting-death.html

A “white paper” entitled, “**How Genetic Restoration Helped the Florida Panther**” by Dave Onorato and Darrell Land on genetic restoration of the Florida panther was published on April 7. It explains this landmark endeavor in layman’s terms. www.floridapanther.net.org/images/field_notes/Panther_Genetic_Restoration_White_Paper_7apr2011Final.pdf

The **Interagency Florida Panther Response Team** released their annual report in April. This report summarizes human-panther interactions investigated during the 2009-10 fiscal year. www.floridapanther.net.org/images/field_notes/Florida_Panther_Response_Team_Annual_Report_2009-10_FINAL.pdf

Three panthers (FP 162, 184, and 182) gave birth to four kittens each in April. Don’t miss next month’s issue for details.

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



Past Update Issues: www.floridapanther.net.org/newsletter.html **Contact us:** floridapanther@fws.gov

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