



**UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE  
ENDANGERED SPECIES PROGRAM**

**TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW Time (5:38)**

**FLORIDA PANTHER (HOST – SARAH LEON WITH CHRIS BELDEN )**

This transcript was produced from audio provided by FWS Endangered Species Program

**P R O C E E D I N G S**

(Music plays.)

MS. LEON: Hello there. This is Sarah Leon for the US Fish and Wildlife Service. I'm on the phone today with Chris Belden, the Florida Panther Recovery Coordinator down at the South Florida Ecological Services Field Office. Hi, Chris. How are you today?

MR. BELDEN: I'm just fine.

MS. LEON: Great. I was hoping that you could spend some time talking to us about the Florida panther.

MR. BELDEN: I'd be glad to.

MS. LEON: All right. Chris, a lot of people may not be familiar with this species. Could you tell our listeners about this beautiful cat?

MR. BELDEN: The Florida panther is a unique subspecies of puma. Pumas also go by common names like cougar, mountain lion, painter, catamount, panther. They're just all different names for the same species.

It's a large, unspotted cat. They're kind of deer colored. The Florida panther is kind of a rusty reddish-brown on the back, with tawny sides and pale grey underneath.

Just kind of a side note, there's never been a melanistic or black puma documented anywhere in North America. I know a lot of people get confused by the term black panther, but they are deer colored.

And the kittens, they are grey with brown or blackish spots which generally fade as they grow older and become almost unnoticeable by the time they're 6 months old.

The Florida panther is the last puma subspecies still surviving in the Eastern United States.

MS. LEON: All right, Chris. And like so many species throughout the nation, the main reason for the Florida panther's decline is human encroachment; is that right?

MR. BELDEN: That's correct. The panther was nearly extirpated by the early settlers. They were afraid of panthers and had fear for their livestock. They did everything they could to exterminate panthers from their historic range. They would shoot them, trap them, and poison them, kill them any way they could. And they pretty well decimated panthers from their historic range, which used to span eight Southeastern states. Now the panther is restricted to less than 5 percent of its former range. It's in one single breeding population in extreme southern Florida. The numbers are estimated to be around 100 animals.

That's pretty much what it's been. It's been persecution and habitat loss.

MS. LEON: All right. Can you tell us a little about this species' role in its environment; how might conserving this species actually benefit other wildlife?

MR. BELDEN: To answer that question, you could say a single male's home range is approximately 200 square miles in size. The entire population covers 3,000 square miles. So because panthers require such a large amount of habitat, it's considered to be an umbrella species in that when you protect a panther, you protect its habitat and all the wildlife that live there. Of course, this includes many threatened and endangered species, as well as the more common species.

MS. LEON: All right. Can you tell us about some of the conservation actions that are currently under way; also, who are some of the partners involved in this species' recovery?

MR. BELDEN: The conservation actions that are currently under way include things like research and monitoring, continued evaluation of genetic restoration, habitat protection and restoration through conservation banking and other regulatory tools, and developing wildlife crossings to protect panthers from collisions with vehicles, as well as education and outreach.

As far as our partners go, the Fish and Wildlife Service partners with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and the National Park Service. These are the primary agencies partnering to recover the Florida panther. But there are many other agencies, NGOs, and private land owners that also assist. It's a big effort.

MS. LEON: All right, Chris. It seems like there's also a lot of public support backing this

species' recovery. In fact, March has been designated as Save the Panther Month. Can you tell us more about this?

MR. BELDEN: Yes. The Florida Panther Month was designated by the governor of Florida. This past March, the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge and the Friends of the Florida Panther Refuge organized outreach events for this Save the Florida Panther Month.

It included the Naples Zoo exhibits, and approximately 5,200 visitors came to the zoo and learned about the recovery efforts for the panther. They had a photography workshop and there were about 80 participants that enjoyed the refuge and learned about panther conservation. Biologists with the Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve led a swamp walk with 17 visitors to explore the preserve's panther habitat. We had panther presentations at the refuge. And there was even a bicycling event to bike some of the nature trails in Big Cypress National Preserve and talk about panthers and panther habitat.

MS. LEON: That's pretty exciting that there's so much attention focused on this animal. Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us. It was a real pleasure having you on.

MR. BELDEN: Okay.

MS. LEON: This is Sarah Leon for the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Thanks for listening.

(Music plays, whereupon the interview was concluded.)