



Panther Update

June 2009

Big Cat Field Stories

“Smoked Panthers”: How Do They Weather a Fire?

On *April 21*, lightning struck from unsettled spring skies in the East Hinson Marsh area of Big Cypress National Preserve. This was the origin of “Deep Fire” which burned a total of over 30 thousand acres and was not designated controlled by The National Park Service until 9:00 p.m. on Monday, *May 11*. Areas of the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge burned as well when the fire jumped State Road 29 - roughly 1366 acres in all. The people of South Florida were forced to endure road closings and a smoke-filled atmosphere, but how did Florida panthers manage?

Panther biologists paid special attention to the animals whose home ranges overlapped with the fire perimeters (FP171, 119, 113, and 140). FP171, a Big Cypress cat, whose habitat was the most disrupted by Deep Fire, never left the area. He simply moved around in the burned and smoky vicinities of his territory finding pockets of unburned vegetation to rest in. The other collared panthers basically did the same thing – not fleeing the fires. Panther biologists will learn more specifics about FP171’s behavior in this fire when it’s time to retrieve his GPS collar.



FP 171’s Unburned Island Refuge through a Smoky Haze during the April 24 Telemetry Flight *Photo by Mark Lotz, FWC*

When asked about how Deep Fire affected these panthers, biologist Mark Lotz, gave this explanation, “Fire doesn’t panic panthers. Panthers, and most other animals for that matter, actually fare pretty well. Most fires slowly creep along, burning ground cover, and flaring up when hitting a thick spot. Usually palmettos with cabbage palms and pines lead to the big flare ups if conditions are right. That type of vegetative layering provides a ladder for the fire to get up into the trees. So, in a large fire like Deep Fire, you’ll get small creeping flames mixed in with large flare ups and spots where the fire didn’t burn at all. That kind of mixed activity is what allows animals to escape the fire unharmed. Larger animals, like panthers, deer, and bears, fare better because they’re able to move more quickly. Occasionally smaller animals do perish though. I’ve found armadillos and snakes after doing prescribed burns. I’ve seen rabbits and screech owls with singed fur and feathers. I’m sure smaller rodents are killed if they’re



FP171 Treed for Capture in March, Later to Hold His Ground While Deep Fire Raged *Photo by Ralph Arwood*

not near a clearing and of course crawling invertebrates have little chance. The biggest potential problem though would be in the case of denning panthers. Depending on how quickly the fire was moving it is unlikely the mother would be able to save every kitten. Bear cubs have perished in this way. Fortunately this type of occurrence has never been documented with panthers.

The South Florida environment is a fire-adapted community, meaning many plants and animals actually depend on fire to remain healthy. Down here, fire maintains and rejuvenates vegetative communities. Fire spurs new growth and when this happens it is very good for deer and, in turn, good for panthers. That’s why the Refuge and other agencies conduct prescribed burns. Deep Fire was what I would call a “good burn”: not too hot and not “complete” with very few trees killed and many unburned pockets or thicker areas to provide refuge, resting cover, and for denning. The area has already started to green up; some portions were greening as others still burned in fact. With the rains we’ve been getting, things should really be popping up now. Of course, deer like fresh grasses and where there are deer, there are often panthers.” (Read another article about the fire by Tracy Weidert of FPNWR coming in the Friends Newsletter: <http://www.floridapanther.org/newsletter.html>.)

FP162: A More Cautious Mom the Second Time Around

By Deb Jansen, Wildlife Biologist, Big Cypress National Preserve

In February of 2008, well-trained cat hounds were intent on the trail of male FP138, whose collar was scheduled to be changed. Instead they treed his uncollared, three-year-old lady friend who became FP162. In spite of the possibility that the courtship was temporarily interrupted, FP162 did give birth to her first litter of kittens three months later (the average gestation period). FP162’s choice of her first den site was not the best. It was a small hammock surrounded by open prairie. Most dens we find are located in dense saw palmetto, where dead and dry fronds crackle a warning to the female whenever something approaches. Upon entering this den to mark the kittens, we found only their remains, probably the handiwork of one of the two collared male panthers recently located in the area.

FP162 did get a second chance at motherhood. When we changed her collar on *February 11, 2009*, DVM Jenny Powers palpated a small head and estimated FP162 to be in her second trimester. As expected, she settled into a den site on *April 13*. We verified her location there for the next twelve days and were preparing to search for the kittens once FP162 left to hunt. Routine enough, so we thought.

But then FP162’s behavior became erratic. On a few occasions, she would leave the den in late morning: somewhat unusual given the heat and less than ideal time to hunt deer. On one flight, Annette Johnson,

wildlife technician, saw collared male FP169 within a mile of the den and found FP162 one-half mile away. Then we found the den “beds” empty at the site. No kittens and no evidence of predation. We were now in fear of an outcome similar to that of her previous den.

FP162 relocated to a pine-palmetto-hardwood thicket over a mile away. There we saw vultures in the trees and on the ground during a brief check from the helicopter. She had lost the kittens, moved off, and had killed something to nourish herself after the two-week den attendance, we hypothesized. But she stayed in that location for six days and we knew that panthers don’t feed on a kill that long in May’s heat. So, with new hope that she had indeed moved her kittens, we found the den and discovered a squirmy, 4 ½ pound, 3 ½ -week-old female kitten (K280) on May 7!



K280’s Got a Good Mom by Ralph Arwood

This is the first time we documented a female panther moving two-week-old kittens over a mile. She may have done this in response to the presence of the male panther, having learned from the fate of her first den.

Cameras left at the den after the female kitten was handled revealed that Mom came back at 12:38 in the morning, sniffed around for a few minutes, then picked up K280 and left. Although no other kitten appeared in the photos, it is possible that FP162 had moved more than one kitten over those few unsettling weeks. We hope to track behind her before the rains flood Big Cypress to see if more than one set of kitten steps are pressed in the mud.



FP162 Moving K280 to a Safer Location on May 8th by Ralph Arwood

May Mortalities: Two more panthers were documented killed on May 14 and 25. Both males, approximately two-years-old, died from vehicle collisions in Collier County. This brings the panther roadkill total to seven and all-total panther deaths to nine for 2009. In June of 2008, by comparison, ten total panther deaths were reported.

What Humans are Doing

On May 12 volunteers at Audubon’s Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary witnessed and videoed a rare daylight sighting of a Florida panther as it took a morning stroll on the sanctuary boardwalk. Below are links to the associated video and articles.

<http://www.nbc-2.com/articles/readarticle.asp?articleid=30038&z=3>

<http://www.naplesnews.com/news/2009/may/26/strolling-florida-panther-caught-video/>

On May 13, Big Cypress National Preserve celebrated the country’s fourth annual Endangered Species Day with the Naples Zoo. Big Cypress National Preserve representatives were on hand to help heighten awareness of our state animal, the endangered Florida panther along with other endangered and threatened species. The zoo generously offered free admittance to anyone who contributed to the South Florida National Parks Trust, which provides support to BCNP and three other national parks in South Florida.

The Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) will be inviting the public to attend an information workshop in Everglades City in July about proposed wildlife crossings on U.S. 41 near Turner River Road in Collier County. These crossings are of vital importance in helping to reduce Florida panther road deaths. Watch for announcements and details in July’s Panther Update.

What You Can Do This Month



Find out how the South Florida National Parks Trust supports Big Cypress National Preserve with Panther research and other programs by visiting their website on: <http://www.southfloridaparks.org/parks.html>

Special Thanks To.....

Layne Hamilton, [Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge](#)

Mark Lotz, [Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission](#)

Deborah Jansen and Ralph Arwood, [Big Cypress National Preserve](#)

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