



Florida Panther Update

April 2010

Field Stories

FP162's Multiple Tries at Motherhood

By Deborah Jansen, BCNP Wildlife Biologist

Big Cypress National Preserve panther biologists have monitored FP162 since she was first collared in February 2008 and estimated to be three years old. At her May 2008 den, they found the remains of two 14-day-old kittens. See [http://www.floridapantherprotection.com/pdf/Panther Update_0608.pdf](http://www.floridapantherprotection.com/pdf/Panther_Update_0608.pdf). She next denned last April and biologists marked one female kitten. It is hard to tell when a kitten is lost, but FP162 was with male FP133 for several days in December 2009, indicating she was back in estrus. And indeed, three months later, she started denning. On March 23, Big Cypress biologists handled three kittens, two females and one male. They are hopeful that this time FP162 will be successful in raising her young to dispersal.



FP162's Kittens as Discovered in Their Den on March 23

Photo by Ralph Arwood

Panther Kittens Get "House Call" from Park Service Vet

Article by Kevin T. Castle DVM, MS, Wildlife Veterinarian with the National Park Service, Biological Resource Management Division in Fort Collins, CO

This year, 2010, marked my third trip to Big Cypress National Preserve to help with panther captures. I had been fortunate to have handled a number of adult panthers over the years, but never experienced an opportunity to "go in on a den" and work with kittens until this year. FP145, the kitten's mother, almost seemed to know we were vigilantly waiting for her to leave because she kept us waiting and monitoring the den, day after day. Actually, we figured she probably had a deer kill cache near the den, keeping her constantly within the range of the telemetry equipment because she did not need to travel far. Finally, on February 25th, we made an early morning trek into



Swaddled in a Pink Towel, FP145's Kitten Receives a Dose of Deworming Medicine from Dr. Castle Photo by John Kellam

the area, hoping that she would be gone when we arrived. To our delight, she was. We didn't know how soon she might return, so we worked quickly.

I helped prepare equipment for handling the kittens while the rest of the team slipped into the brush in search of the den. I was expecting this to take some time, but after only a few minutes we heard a "whoop" (standard field call) from the hammock, which signaled that the den had been found. First two kittens and then a third were gently carried to the swamp buggy, covered with towels to keep the cold wind off. Once they arrived at the buggy, we carefully weighed them, determined their sex (two females and a male), and obtained an ear biopsy for genetic analysis. The kittens tried their best to intimidate us with hisses and growls, but we were not deterred, and they may have been upset to see that their fierceness generated quiet laughter and exclamations of "aawwwww", rather than fear. When the hisses and growls failed to work, they turned to "mewing", hoping their mother would come save them. At four weeks old, these were the oldest and largest kittens the team had handled in a while. Ordinarily, blood samples would have been collected, but these kittens were a bit too feisty and would not hold still. Rather than stress them out, we opted to forego the blood draws. Of course each spotted ball of fluff and teeth and claws had to have a complete physical exam as well, so I made sure to take a little extra time to look under the three kitten's ears and chin. Additional belly rubs helped me determine that they were all indeed quite healthy.



The Panther Team Witnessed this Hasty Return of FP145 to Her Den as They Departed the Site Photo by Ralph Arwood

Once we finished collecting the necessary information, the kittens were given a dose of deworming liquid and returned to their cozy den. We then made sure to remove as many traces of our visit as possible. As luck would have it, we spotted FP145

making her way back to the den shortly after we left. She seemed to be in a hurry to return to her kittens, and after checking her telemetry signals a short while later, we knew she was back home.

Radio Collars and Trail Cams Aid in Search of Orphaned Kittens

Article and Photo by Mark Lotz, FWC Panther Biologist

There were three reported Florida panther deaths in March, two of which were the result of vehicle collisions. The third, female Florida panther #172 (FP172) was first captured by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) on November 12, 2009 in the Addition Lands of Big Cypress National Preserve.



FP172 at capture. Biologists used location points generated by this collar to search for her orphaned kittens.

Months later, FP172 gave birth to three male kittens a mile north of I-75 (Alligator Alley) near the 59 mile marker. We deployed our “biologist-in-a-box” (den monitoring device) on February 19 and headed out the very next day to mark the kittens. They were about two weeks old. Subsequent tracking of FP172 three days a week from a fixed-wing aircraft, as we do with all radiocollared panthers, indicated everything was proceeding normally with the growing kittens. However, on March 22 we heard a distressing signal emanating from FP172’s collar, one that indicated she was in mortality.

There is a mechanism inside the collars that doubles the pulse rate of the signal when it has been motionless for two hours. When we arrived at the scene we were not surprised to find that FP172 had been killed by an adult male panther. It was suspected she was vigorously defending a deer kill for herself and her young. (See http://floridapanther.org/update_0709.pdf for a discussion of female panther IA.) Not only was a fresh deer cache found near FP172’s body, but the odors of two potential meals had attracted the attention of a 7-foot alligator that unfortunately was missing half of his lower jaw.

Knowing that FP172’s kittens were only six weeks old and not able to survive on their own we began what ended up being a three-day search. Although it has been done in the past, using hounds to track these kittens was not an option. The kittens were too young: not big and fast enough to tree safely. They could too easily be accidentally killed by the dogs.

The original den site had been vacated a couple of weeks prior. A hammock with a cluster of telemetry points was scoured and ample evidence of their presence was found. Unfortunately, nothing was “last-night-fresh.” The kittens were nearing the age when they follow their mother to kills and begin the weaning process so naturally the hammock where FP172 had cached her meal, and where her body laid, was searched on more than one occasion. Cameras were set up on the deer cache in hopes of capturing a curious or hungry kitten but to no avail. Locations with only one telemetry point were also searched and FP172’s day beds were found but there was no evidence the kittens were with her at the time. We even searched likely areas between locations and were able to find day bed sites but still no kittens. After days of searching with the help of telemetry data and trail cams it became apparent they would not be found. Sometimes the odds do fall in favor of the cats. We have successfully located orphaned panther kittens in the past, raised them in captivity and released them into the wild. Technology can increase those odds. Radio collars and trail cameras are useful devices not only in gaining important data for research, but also for managing the panther population (as in this search) and providing insights into the panthers’ struggle for survival.

What People Are Doing

April 1: in a news release “**FWC urges responsible behavior when living near panthers.**”

http://www.myfwc.com/Newsroom/10/statewide/News_10_X_LiveNearPanthers.htm

March 20: **State spending \$650,000 for sensors to alert U.S. 41 drivers that panthers may be near.** Naples Daily News story <http://www.naplesnews.com/news/2010/mar/20/state-spending-650000-sensors-alert-us-41-drivers/>

Governor Crist Proclaimed March 20 as “Save the Florida Panther Day” and Collier County Commissioners Proclaimed *March 14 – 20* as “Save the Florida Panther Week”. Find and read the proclamations on: <http://www.floridapanther.net/org/>

March 5: **Florida Panther Podcast.** This podcast features Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission biologist Mark Lotz and Laurie Macdonald, Florida Director for Defenders of Wildlife. They discuss the Florida panther, its past history and future prospects. http://www.floridapantherprotection.com/mp3/FPP_Florida%20Panther%20Podcast.mp3

What You Can Do

Conserve Water. We are rapidly heading toward a worldwide freshwater crisis. All life, including Florida panthers depend on fresh water to survive. Start reducing your water footprint today.

<http://environment.nationalgeographic.com/environment/freshwater/top-ten/>

Florida Panther Update Partners

Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge (FPNWR) <http://www.fws.gov/floridapanther/>

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) <http://www.floridapanther.net/org/>

Big Cypress National Preserve (BCNP) <http://www.nps.gov/bicy/index.htm>

FGCU “Wings of Hope” Florida Panther Posse <http://www.fgcu.edu/CAS/WingsofHope/index.html>

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Past Issues: <http://www.floridapantherprotection.com/PantherUpdates.aspx?n=4>