

# Florida Panther

## *National Wildlife Refuge*



photo: Larry Richardson



photo: USFWS



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### Refuge Facts

- Established: June 1989
- Acres: 26,400
- Located in Collier County, Florida, 25<sup>th</sup> Congressional District.
- Location: The refuge is located 20 miles east of Naples, FL, northwest of the intersection of Interstate 75 and State Road 29. The refuge headquarters is located in the Comfort Inn at exit 101 off of Interstate 75.
- Administers Ten Thousand Islands NWR.
- Administers the South Florida Partners for Fish and Wildlife program.

### Natural History

- Refuge is located in the northern portion of the Fakahatchee Strand of the Big Cypress Swamp.
- Each month, 5-11 Florida panthers den, hunt, and roam within the refuge.
- Black bear, bobcat, white-tailed deer, Big Cypress fox squirrels and wood stork utilize the refuge. Large concentrations of wading and water birds feed, nest, and roost on the refuge.
- The refuge is composed of a variety of wetland and upland habitats including pine flatwoods, cypress strands and domes, wet prairies, tropical hardwood hammocks and hydric pinelands.
- Rare orchids and bromeliads are found throughout the refuge. The Native Orchid Restoration lab is located on the refuge. The goal of the lab is to promote the restoration of native orchids on public lands in south Florida.

### Financial Impact of Refuge

- 18 person staff.

- Public use restricted to designated hiking trails at southeast corner of refuge. Remainder of refuge is accessible only through limited tours. Approximately 8,000 visitors annually.

### Refuge Goals

- Provide optimum habitat conditions for the Florida Panther.
- Restore conserve the natural diversity, abundance, and ecological function of refuge flora and fauna.
- Conduct research, monitoring and evaluations to improve management of flora and fauna on the refuge and within the South Florida ecosystem.
- Develop appropriate and compatible wildlife-dependent recreation and environmental education programs.
- Promote interagency and private landowner cooperation for the protection and management of natural and cultural resources within southwest Florida.

### Management Tools

- Prescribed fire.
- Mechanical/chemical/biological control of non-native pest plants.
- Mechanical/chemical control of invasive native trees such as cabbage palms and wax myrtle.
- Education/interpretation.
- Law enforcement.
- Native orchid propagation
- Partnerships: Division of Forestry, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Friends of the Florida Panther Refuge, National Park Service, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

### Public Use Opportunities

- Hiking.
- Wildlife Observation.
- Photography.
- Limited public tours.

### Calendar of Events

**January:** Southwest Florida Wildlife and Birding Festival.

**March:** Save the Panther Week.

**May:** International Migratory Bird Day.

**October:** National Wildlife Refuge Week.

### Questions and Answers

*How many panthers use the refuge?*

On a monthly basis, 5-11 panthers use a portion of the refuge for hunting, traveling to other areas, loafing, or denning.

*Why is public use limited on the refuge?*

Public access to the refuge is very limited because various outdoor recreational activities could disturb panthers and their prey, which would be inconsistent with the refuge purpose of providing optimal panther habitat and protection. Two hiking trails were constructed in 2005 to provide limited public access to the refuge. These trails were constructed in an area that receives very little panther use.

*Can I see a panther in the wild?*

Panthers are very secretive animals. They are predominately active from dusk to dawn and rest during the day. Consequently, you are unlikely to see a panther on the refuge or on adjacent public lands.

*Why do we burn the refuge?*

The refuge staff utilizes fire to maintain healthy native vegetation communities on the refuge. Fire is set under "prescribed" conditions. These prescribed burns are only conducted if the winds, temperature and humidity are within a designated range and the refuge has adequate staff and equipment. By conducting burns under particular conditions, the staff can control the location, intensity, and duration of the fire.

In Florida, fire is an important part of the natural ecology of many vegetation communities, such as pinelands and wet prairies. Fire is needed to maintain these communities and prevent the encroachment of shrubs such as wax myrtle and willows. Fire also reduces hazardous build up of debris and decadent vegetation which can fuel wildfires.

*Why do we remove non-native invasive plants from the refuge?*

As people moved into Florida, they brought non-native plants with them. Some of these plants escaped cultivation and became established in the natural areas of Florida. Several of the most prolific species are Brazilian pepper tree, Australian pine, melaleuca, and old world climbing fern. These species are extremely invasive and can limit or prevent native plants from growing in natural areas. Large acreages of these invasive plants also change the fire regime of the area, reducing fire in some cases and increasing its destructive effects in other circumstances. Non-native plants also degrade wildlife habitat. By removing these plants from the environment through the use of mechanical removal, herbicides, or biological means (e.g. release of specific insects that parasitize or consume a specific plant species), vegetation communities are improved for wildlife.

*How do we monitor the panthers?*

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission captures and radio-collars panthers on the refuge to study home-range size, habitat use, reproductive success, and dispersal patterns. Refuge staff monitors panther use of the refuge by observing tracks and scrapes. Infrared cameras are placed in various areas of the refuge. These cameras take pictures of panthers and other wildlife utilizing the refuge.