

Florida Panther Field Note  
June 2008

FP158 Dens in Collier Seminole State Park

This month, Florida panther 158 became the first radio collared panther to den in Collier Seminole State Park, just 500 feet south of US41. I have worked a number of den sites and this one was definitely among the most difficult. FP158 denned in an old agricultural field that had become overgrown with Brazilian pepper: one of Florida's nastiest and fast growing invasive exotic plants. Brazilian pepper is a large shrub but grows into tree-like proportions as well. Its branches are long and arching and individual shrubs grow very close together. These branches mingle together creating a virtually impenetrable barrier. Due to the difficulty in moving through this vegetation it was difficult to pinpoint FP158's position. Normal procedure for pinpointing a den site entails walking completely around the area while the mother is present and triangulating her position with telemetry gear. Hopefully there will be some natural feature, such as a tree, prominent branch or other unique vegetation, which can be keyed in on. Having done that, when the adult female leaves the den, we know where to focus our search. However, in this case we could only get a location from one side of the den and it was from farther away than what is preferred.

We began monitoring her presence at the den with our remote listening station, affectionately known as the "biologist-in-a-box." For the first week FP158 only left her kittens after dark. Finally, on June 3<sup>rd</sup> she left the den at about eight in the morning; but our initial search was fruitless. Forced to maneuver on our hands and knees, trying to make progress through just 10 feet of the pepper was a grueling process. Adding to the difficulty was the fact that bug jackets were needed to ward off thick clouds of mosquitoes. The screened hoods of these jackets are difficult to see through and they are surprisingly hot to wear, especially in South Florida's summer time heat and humidity. After several hours had passed without success it became obvious that a better location was needed. On the next telemetry flight the area was scanned more carefully and a royal palm tree was noted very near the den site. Heading toward this tree on our second opportunity on June 7<sup>th</sup> we managed to find the den in about 45 minutes! .

The den site was situated under a clump of Japanese climbing fern (*Lygodium japonicum*), another invasive exotic, that was draped over the Brazilian pepper branches. Securely nestled deep inside the den, about six feet from the entrance, were the kittens. Four little faces (three male and one female), unaffected by the mosquitoes, peered back at me. Because the ferns and pepper were so thick, it took crawling on my belly to reach the kittens. In stages, I brought them closer to me, squirming backwards on my belly to move us all out of the den. The kittens were about two weeks old, healthy, and ranged in weight from 1.5 to 2.1 pounds. The same "belly crawl" technique was used to replace them after their work up. After one final struggle with the plants, bugs and heat, to get back to the trucks, we drank a half gallon of water, removed the biologist-in-a-box, and called it a day. FP158's home range includes both sides of US41. Hopefully she will be successful in getting all four kittens across when the time comes.



These kittens were born just 500 feet away from US41. Photograph by Mark Lotz.



One of FP158's kittens hisses in displeasure after being pulled from the cozy confines of his den. Photograph by Mark Lotz