



Florida Panther Update

Field Stories

January 2012

With the 2011 holiday season behind us, and its appetizing indulgences now fading in our memories, it seems fitting for this issue to spotlight December monitoring efforts concerning the feeding behavior of two Florida panthers: FP183 and FP194.

FP183: Preying for More Daylight

On December 7, panther biologist Mark Lotz cautiously bounced a swamp buggy over old limestone-dappled roads in Picayune Strand State Forest. Around him were reminders of the ongoing restoration: excavating machines both moving and parked; logs and stumps in massive piles, some slowly burning with rising thin columns of smoke. And at one journey point, in a more remote area alongside a crude road, there appeared a reminder of the Florida panther: a scrape, stamped in the center with a paw print.

Mark and his two assistants were hoping to fit in a visit to two Florida panther GPS data cluster sites before sundown. Cluster sites are areas where a collared (FP183 has a GPS-GSM [Global System for Mobile Communications] collar) panther's location data showed the cat to be near the same location over a period of hours or days, indicating the panther had settled for a while. When this happens it can mean the panther is resting, mating, denning (in the case of a female) or feeding on a recent kill. When the location data shows the panther has traveled on from the area, it is safe to visit. Mark was tasked with investigating two of these sites that week to document evidence of the panther's activities as part of a Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) prey study. Some cluster locations are easy to get to and others more of a challenge. These were going to be a challenge. FP183 was hanging out in a very remote part of Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park adjacent to the forest.

Cross-referencing the cluster data map, a GPS navigator loaded with the coordinates of the first site, and an aerial map, Mark steered the buggy off the road, skirting cabbage palms (a few with tops smashed by Florida black bears foraging for hearts of palm) until he found a watery trail, almost like a canal, winding through a picturesque cypress swamp. It was almost 3:30 PM and Mark knew chances were getting slimmer for investigating both sites before dark. His day began at 6:30 AM because it was more than a week into the FWC's panther capture season. That morning Roy McBride's hounds had treed a female. She was left uncollared because conditions were determined not to be safe enough to capture her. Since capture work was taking place in the mornings, the weekly investigation of two prey sites took place in the afternoon.

Halting the buggy at approximately 500 feet from the coordinates, Mark led the way, boots splashing through knee-high crystal-clear water to the area very recently occupied by Florida Panther #183. He documented three daybeds (panther resting places), verified by panther hairs and footprints. And he scanned and sniffed the area, searching for tell-tale signs of a prey carcass such as bones, an odor, or a vulture. Once a panther finishes with a carcass, it is left uncovered. Vultures often complete the job and can cause remaining evidence to be scattered and hard to find. A pile of feathers indicated that a predator had recently taken a grey catbird, but it was most likely done by a Cooper's hawk. Ultimately, no large prey carcass was discovered, and the sun hung too low for a trip to the second site. Mark would be making the long drive back in the next day. It seems "preyers" aren't always answered.



Upper: Picking through the flattened leaves and trampled soil of a panther daybed to find hairs or paw prints for verification. **Lower:** A white hair from FP183's belly: hard (soft) evidence of a bed site. *USFWS Photos*

Florida Panthers hunt at dawn and dusk. They rush short distances and spring at their prey. They kill by a bite to the neck or skull. An adult male typically consumes larger-sized prey (e.g., white-tailed deer) every 8 to 11 days, while an adult female with kittens may consume large prey more often. After the first meals, panthers "cache" their prey by putting debris over the carcass. Panthers may return to feed on the same carcass over several days until they are ready to move on or the carcass has become too rancid to consume.
Currently the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission is engaged in a prey study under the direction of Dr. Dave Onorato. Watch for Dave's article with more specifics on the study in the February Panther Update issue.

FP194: Eat Right, Avoid Fights and Don't Play in the Street

On November 29, fifteen-month-old male FP194 was released back into the wilds of Big Cypress National Preserve (BCNP). It was a positive event for all involved with the rescue and raising of this cat. The BCNP panther team could not rest easy, however. Because he was raised in captivity for the previous year, there lingered three major questions concerning the well-being of this panther. Will he avoid roads or be able to cross them safely? Will he be able to defend himself in conflicts with other panthers? And, most importantly, will he be able to successfully kill prey? Around two weeks after the release, on December 11, the third question was answered.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

In the midmorning sun, Deborah Jansen, BCNP biologist, waded for one-half hour through knee-high cypress slough waters, checking her direction with a GPS navigator which contained the coordinates (obtained from FP194's satellite collar, developed by North Star Science and Technology, Inc.) of the potential FP194 prey site. When the terrain opened into wet prairie, black vultures pointed the way. One flew overhead while the other perched in a tree. Stopping short of the GPS coordinates Deborah raised a receiver antenna and listened for FP194's radio signal to assure he had not returned to the area. Minutes later the first evidence of his kill was discovered: the lower leg of a white-tailed deer, complete with dew-claws and hoof. After a little more searching she discovered the kill site with additional lower leg bones, sections of lower jaw, a piece of rib, scattered tufts of deer hair and the still-buried ruminant stomach.

This evidence was consistent with Deborah's knowledge of how a panther feeds on its kill: "He first plucks some of the fur with his teeth. He then opens the body cavity and removes and buries the stomach and intestines to lessen the odor that might attract other animals. His first meal consists of the most nourishing organs, particularly the heart and liver. The meaty shoulders and thighs can then quickly fill his belly. If not yet a skilled hunter, or if prey is not abundant, a panther will remain at the carcass and consume

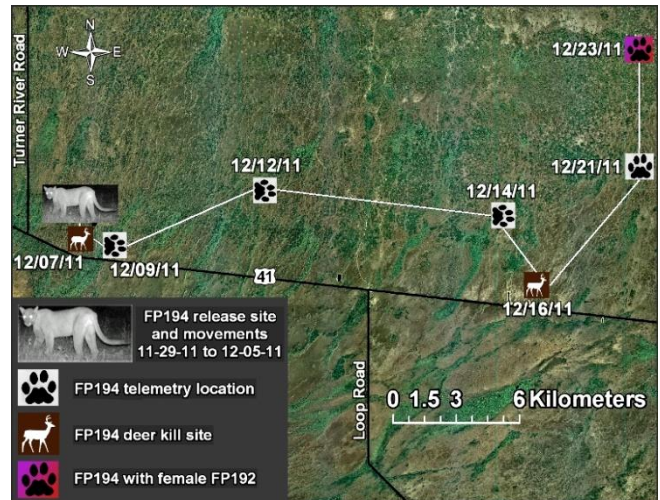


Leftovers from FP194's feast. Studying a deer's tooth eruption and wear can yield clues to its age. USFWS Photo

most of the bones, including the vertebrae. The bones are also cracked open and the marrow is licked out with the cat's rough tongue."

Deborah reasoned FP194's prize to be a young deer born the previous spring because the lower jaw still contained the baby premolars. It was now clear FP194 could feed himself in the wild. A second prey investigation on December 20 at a site twelve miles away confirmed it again, yielding a yearling buck skull, four lower legs, the pelvic girdle and pieces of vertebrae. FP194 had been dining on his second kill from December 15 to 19.

On December 23, FP194 was located with FP192, a 2½-year-old collared female panther. Although likely still too young to be sexually mature, FP194 had at least discovered that there were other panthers around. And the BCNP panther team? They're a little more relaxed these days.



This graphic depicts FP194's activities since being set free. He managed to eat well, stay off the street (HWY41) and make a new friend. As of 01/01/2012, he had moved a straight-line distance of over seventeen miles from the release site.

Figure by John Kellam, BCNP

FLORIDA WILDLIFE CORRIDOR EXPEDITION

Notices and Links

On January 17, the Florida Wildlife Corridor Initiative will kick off a 1000 mile expedition over a 100 day period to increase public awareness and generate support for the Florida Wildlife Corridor project. One of the many Florida Wildlife Corridor goals is to protect and restore dispersal and migration corridors essential for the survival of Florida's diverse wildlife, including the wide-ranging Florida panther. www.floridawildlifecorridor.org

On December 13, the Hendry County Board of County Commissioners voted in favor of designating 5.25 miles of CR 832/Keri Road as a slow speed nighttime panther zone. Elizabeth Fleming, Florida Representative for Defenders of Wildlife, authored a blog regarding new nighttime slower speed zone on Keri Road in Okaloacoochee Slough to help protect panthers from vehicle collisions. Coincidentally she also experienced her first panther sighting on that day. www.defendersblog.org/2011/12/florida-panther-sighting-heralds-slow-zone-designation

On December 27, Naples Daily News Published "Domestic Animal Services: Panther-Killed Horse Found Dead on Christmas Day" by Kristine Gill. www.naplesnews.com/news/2011/dec/27/das-panther-killed-horse-found-dead-christmas-day

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Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) www.floridapanther.net/org

Big Cypress National Preserve (BCNP) www.nps.gov/bicy

Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge (FPNWR) www.fws.gov/floridapanther



Past Update Issues: www.floridapanther.org/newsletter.html Contact us: floridapanther@fws.gov

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