

The Re-capture of #61
17 February 2000
Prepared by Roy McBride

The principals for this hunt were: David Shindle, crew chief for Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission's (FWC) panther capture team; Mark Lotz, FWC biologist and veteran tree climber; and Kristin Charlton, our contract veterinarian. In addition to the regular capture team, we were assisted by Sonny Bass, program leader for the Everglades National Park panther project. Sonny has been involved with panthers in Everglades National Park since 1986. I, Roy McBride, finished out the crew as the contract houndsman whose responsibility is to furnish the trained dogs for the project, a job I've held since the program began in 1981.



This year's capture season has been the most successful ever, but was frustrated a great deal by the fact that a majority of our efforts were directed at recapturing a number of panthers whose radio collars had stopped transmitting. Panther #61 was such a case. Her radio failed in April of 1999, about one month after Mark and I located her den on the eastern end of Long Pine Key. She had given birth to a healthy male kitten in a depression under a storm-downed oak tree. Since we had lost contact with her, we had no knowledge of whether or not she still had her kitten.

Capturing a panther whose radio collar has failed is like kissing your sister. It ain't much fun but it's something you got to do. The effort doesn't add any new cats to the sample, but only gets you back to where you were. We had already recaptured TX108, whose collar had also failed, on the west side of Long Pine Key. Now we could concentrate on #61.

We felt sure we had found her tracks in and around her old home range. Now it was just a matter of persistence until the hounds would find a trail fresh enough to follow. On

February 16th we got a fresh lead when a number of female panther urine markers were found on the east end of Long Pine Key (see attached map). It looked like #61 was in estrus and trying to attract a mate. I had a hunch that the panther may leave the hammock and travel west during the night and I might intersect her tracks on the trail going north from Research Road at gate #2.

So the next morning before daylight, I was hunting the hounds up this trail with Mark, David, and Kristin stationed along the main park highway in case the panther trail crossed the road. Sure enough, the hounds (KoKo, Tuffy, Rosie, Ruby, and Clack) found a fresh panther trail north of gate #2 and were really taking it "yonder." I radioed David and Mark to watch out because the dogs' and panther's trails were headed directly toward the highway. In moments the dogs were in the road and only quick work from David and Mark kept them from getting run over. Our best chance so far to catch #61 was slipping away because traffic on the main park highway was really getting heavy. I was unwilling to let our best chance so far just evaporate so I took one hound (KoKo) and let her out during a break in the traffic. She could still track the panther down the shoulder of the road where the panther had walked under the cover of darkness and hours before the traffic started. I had to stop KoKo and load her in the truck several times when cars were getting close, but she kept her patience and resumed trailing silently when I put her back out. When KoKo got to the intersection of the main park highway and Royal Palm Road she turned south and trailed down to the fork of Royal Palm Road and Research Road. Here she turned west into the big hammock on the west side of the road. After going a short distance, she crossed the road and went east into another big hammock that formed a triangle between Research Road and Royal Palm Road. Now she had gained on the panther enough that the trail was fresh and she started opening on the track. In a few moments she caught up to the panther and really started cranking. I went in to get close so I could hear her when she treed and got David, Mark, Sonny, and Kristin to spread out on the two roads to help if she came out again. I was close to KoKo when she treed and as soon as I got to the tree she started running again going south. I looked up in the tree where KoKo had just left and there was a young male panther staring at me as I approached. He glanced around and quietly jumped to the ground and disappeared in the dense underbrush in the hammock. I called David on my hand-held radio and asked him to bring Rosie and Tuffy to me A.S.A.P. He arrived in moments and I let these two hounds go, whereupon they immediately found the trail of the male panther and started west. As soon as the panther made a turn to the north, I asked Mark to let Ruby and Clack loose from his truck. Meanwhile, KoKo was still going south with another panther.

We now had two chases going at once in a narrow hammock between two roads. But with everyone scattered along these two roads there was a chance we could keep the dogs and panthers from being run over. Sonny radioed for a park ranger to come help with the traffic. KoKo treed her panther on the south end of the hammock and the four other hounds soon treed the young male again. The crew came in and we darted the young male and began the work-up. KoKo joined his sisters at the tree and we now had #61's kitten caught, but still not #61. As soon as the work-up was over, I took KoKo back to the south end of the hammock and turned her loose. She began to cast about and soon found the

trail of #61. I radioed Sonny and asked if the other hounds could hear her. He responded by saying that they were listening to KoKo. I asked him to turn them out if there were no cars coming and he did. Soon we had all five hounds after #61. She treed in a big oak, but when I walked up she jumped out and ran again. I called the crew to bring in the capture gear and meanwhile the race was circling close to where the young male was waking up. Number 61 treed again, but again when the team arrived at the tree she jumped out again. The third time she treed she stayed and we managed to get a dart in her rump. Mark had a tough tree to climb with lots of vines and branching limbs, but he got it done and we recollared #61. Only a short distance away her son was waking up.















Since the capture, Sonny reports that this panther family travels extensively to the north and southwest of the capture site in their search of deer. The young male is nearing age for dispersal and is the heir apparent to the role of the dominant male in Everglades National Park. His father, #16, was found dead on January 7th, 2000 at the age of 14.

See Map of Capture Area Below

PINELAND TRAILS

of the Long Pine Key area
Everglades National Park

	Lake		Paved Road
	Savannah Prairie		Long Pine Key Nature Trail (Bikes O.K.)
	Hardwood Hammock		Hiking Trail
	Pineland		Rocky Trail
	Old Agricultural Lands		Walking Trail
			Gate and Number
			Distance in Miles between junctions

0 1 Mile

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