

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER WITH A FLORIDA PANTHER IN THE BIG CYPRESS SWAMP

BY FRANKLIN ADAMS

It was Saturday October 14, 2000 at 9:00 a.m. This was the second Saturday of muzzle-loading hunting in Big Cypress National Preserve. I was deer hunting. Since it was a full moon I left camp later than usual figuring that the deer had fed during the night and would not be moving till later. There was already a good wind out of the northeast.

I was headed for a treestand on the west edge of a pine island not far from camp and I was still -hunting my way there. As I approached the point of the island I thought I heard something on the pine island to the northwest of me. Stopping, I listened but did not hear anything. I continued moving around the edge of the island stopping every fifty feet or so to listen and scan the area around me. Again I heard a commotion on the pine island to the northwest and this time I could see vultures landing in the pines about five hundred yards away. I watched about twenty vultures land in the trees but noticed that they did not go down to the ground. I assumed that they had found a deer or hog but for some reason they were waiting in the pines. I was curious but decided to continue still hunting to the treestand. My plan was to stand a couple of hours and then go see what the vultures had found.

I continued to move slowly along the edge of the island. When I stopped again I heard and saw the vultures flying down to the ground. A couple of minutes passed and I thought I heard something in the water on the edge of the island. I assumed that it was the vultures feeding on whatever they had discovered since they will feed in shallow water. Again, I continued on my way for a short distance. When I stopped, I distinctly heard something walking in the water. Listening closely, I could tell it was coming towards the pine island that I was standing on. Whatever it was, it was following a game trail that ran between two cypress heads which would bring it very close to my position. The water depth was about six to eight inches and it was making no attempt to be quiet. Moving behind a cypress tree to better conceal myself, I waited.

In a couple of minutes I saw movement as a tawny-brown animal appeared about two hundred-fifty yards away. Naturally, I assumed it was a deer. My first thought was to look for antlers. Looking through my scope I saw instead a round head and short rounded ears. I realized instantly that it was a panther. To say that I was excited would not begin to describe the exhilaration that I felt. I could hear my heart pounding in my ears as adrenalin coursed through my system. I could not believe how fortunate I was. It was a panther coming from its kill. The wind was strong in my favor and the unsuspecting top predator in Big Cypress was coming directly to where I stood. As it drew nearer the first thing I looked for was a collar. It had no collar! Soon it was within a hundred feet and would pass within fifty feet of my position. I continued to observe it through my scope until it was very close. It was a large male that appeared to be in its prime. Its paunch hung down in fullness. I estimate that it weighted around one hundred-forty pounds. I could now see its expressionless eyes, its whiskers and its mouth was partially open. It carried its long tail curving upward in an arc. As it came closer I watched and savored every moment of this once in a lifetime experience*. The panther had absolutely no idea that I was standing down wind from it at only fifty feet away. I had to resist the urge to move closer. It passed in front of me and came up onto the pine island out of the water. It stopped momentarily at the point where I had crossed the game trail earlier. Putting its head down it smelled my tracks, looked around left to right, and very unconcerned continued into the pine island. It was headed for a hardwood thicket where I assumed it would lay-up for the day. Not wanting to disturb or alert it, I slowly continued my walk to the treestand. About ten minutes later the scolding of catbirds and the raucous calling of crows near the thicket confirmed the panthers presence.

Sitting in the treestand I could think of nothing but the panther. The most thrilling part of the experience was the realization that this was an uncollared panther. For that brief time while I watched it, the cat was not an endangered, politicized, and numbered Florida Panther. I was watching this magnificent predator in its native habitat doing just what nature had designed it to do, and it never knew that I was its witness. For

an all to brief moment it was just me and the cat up-close and nothing else mattered. Mother nature had certainly given me a special blessing and I was thankful.

Waiting about two hours in the treestand I came down and slowly waded to the pine island where I knew the panther had made its kill. The vultures had not stayed long after the panther had left. Coming up on the island where I thought the vultures had perched I saw no obvious sign of a kill. Moving further up onto the island near the edge of the palmettos I smelled a faint odor on the wind. Moving back and forth I was able to determine where the odor was strongest. Pushing through the palmettos I came to the spot where the kill had taken place. It was next to a small pine in a small opening. The needle grass was packed down in an area about five by six feet across and a tuft of brown and white hair could be seen. While I was standing examining the kill area, a single black vulture flapped its way out of the high palmettos about forty feet away. Pushing slowly into this area I found the remains of the panthers kill. It was a small doe. All that remained were the hide, legs, lower jawbone, skull and part of the spine and ribcage. The cat had opened the skull and eaten the brain. It had not left much for the scavengers, only the rumen which I had smelled. There was no decay and the kill had been cached and covered-up with a large amount of pine needles. I assumed that the kill had been made sometime the day before. Probably the cat had fed on the deer immediately after the kill, covered it up, and then fed a second time early Saturday morning. The lower jawbone was intact so I saved it for the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission biologist.

Returning to camp I shared this wonderful experience with my hunting friends.

* I had seen two panthers at a distance previously. The first was with my father G.B. Adams a land surveyor in Everglades National Park in the summer of 1957. A panther came out of the pinelands, ran down the limerock road in front of our car and then darted into the pines on the opposite side of the road. Around 1962-63 I saw a young panther on the Corkscrew Swamp. The sighting was entered in the daily log book at the sanctuary.