



# Finding the elusive Florida panther

*By FWC staff ~ Photographs by Mark Lotz*

W  
What kid, young or not-so-young, hasn't wondered what it would be like to track and capture one of the world's big cats? Or dreamed of holding squirming, small balls of fur while mama cat is away? Members of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's (FWC) panther capture team get to do just that each year.

The annual panther capture season begins mid-November and goes through March. In addition to replacing radio-collars (which last about three years), the FWC capture team monitors and vaccinates panthers for feline leukemia virus. The goal is to vaccinate as many panthers as possible in order to halt the spread of this deadly virus throughout the population.

However, like many things in life, there's much more to panther capture than meets the eye.

"You might not think catching panthers was as much fun if you had to tote all the gear with you, including veterinary supplies, capture equipment, crash bag, safety net and climbing gear," said Mark Lotz, in the FWC's Division of Habitat and Species

Conservation's Imperiled Species Management Section and veteran panther capture team member.

First, you might spend days and days searching for a panther and never see one, even though your radio-collar tracking device indicates a panther is within 50 yards.

Then, if you're lucky enough to find a panther, it's likely to climb a very high tree in an effort to avoid you. Then, you must find just the right angle to shoot an anesthetic dart, which isn't easy with all the tree limbs in the way and a moving target.

After the cat is sedated, you have to climb a 20-foot, 30-foot or even taller tree, tie a security rope around the panther, which may weigh 100 to 150 pounds, and slowly lower it to the ground.

The panther is then given a thorough veterinary exam, and left to wake from the anesthesia. The capture team leaves the immediate area while the cat is still asleep to lessen the amount of stress on the panther as the sedative wears off.

The dedicated FWC members know all their efforts ultimately benefit these endangered cats.

## Florida panther identification

“FP” denotes a Florida panther captured and wearing a radio-collar, “UCFP” denotes an uncollared Florida panther never before handled, and “K” denotes a panther marked with a transponder chip at the den (as a kitten) but never radio-collared. All “categories” (i.e.: FP, UCFP, K) of panthers are numbered sequentially as they are encountered.

During the past capture season, Nov. 14, 2005 through March 24, 2006, 13 Florida panthers were captured. Seven previously uncollared panthers (FP140, FP141, FP142, FP143, FP144, FP146 and FP148) were added to the study population. One panther with a failed radio-collar was reacquired (FP121) and radio collars were replaced on five others (FP94, FP95, FP100, FP131 and FP135) for routine anticipated battery failure.

Litters from two panthers were handled during the capture season. FP107 denned on the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge in February. A female (K200) and male (K201) were marked with transponders when the kittens were about 6 days old. They each weighed 1.5 pounds, and their eyes were only halfway open. FP121 denned on the Seminole Indian Reservation in late February. The kittens, a female (K202) and two males (K203, K204) were marked with transponders when they were about 12 days old. Genetic samples were obtained from only one kitten because of FP121’s quick return to the den site.

**Right:** FP83 demonstrates how elusive and agile the big cats are by climbing a tall, very slender tree. **Below:** The panther team administers a perfect shot with an anesthetic dart. A few moments later, FP144 eased himself down the tree and was captured on the ground. **Facing page:** FP107’s 6-day-old kitten has eyes that are partially open. They will open fully in the next few days.





**Top:** On the first day of last year's capture season, the team not only collared FP140 but also treed three of her kittens (one of them pictured here). The kittens were not collared since they were less than a year old. **Center:** A treetop view, 30 feet above ground, as Mark Lotz safely lowers FP100 to the ground. **Right:** Capturing panthers is more difficult than just following their tracks in the sand. **Bottom:** Dr. Mark Cunningham with FWC's Fish and Wildlife Research Institute performs a veterinary exam on FP131.

In 2005, FWC biologists documented nine panther dens containing 15 male kittens and 10 female kittens, a total of 25 Florida panthers younger than a month old.

During this same time period, one panther died due to intraspecific aggression (killed by another panther), nine were killed by vehicles (roadkill) and two died of unknown causes, a total of 12, four females and eight males

Since 1972, 88 panthers have been killed by collisions with vehicles. Wildlife crossings and right-of-way fencing have been installed along more than 40 miles of roadways that cross public lands. No panthers have been killed where these structures are in place.

Visit PantherNet at [MyFWC.com/panther](http://MyFWC.com/panther) to learn more about the Florida panther. **FW**

### Two ways to help the Florida panther

You can aid in the recovery of injured or orphaned Florida panthers as well as other panther conservation needs by making a donation to the Panther Fund established by The Wildlife Foundation of Florida (WFF). This fund gives the FWC flexibility to deal with rare, unplanned and non-budgeted events. Anyone can donate to this fund. For more details on why this fund is so important visit [MyFWC.com/panther/fund.html](http://MyFWC.com/panther/fund.html).

Florida panther research is funded through the Florida Panther Research and Management Trust Fund. This fund receives its monies from your purchase of Florida panther specialty license plates. Eighty-five percent of the proceeds from the \$25 for each license plate collected annually go into this trust fund.



# Florida panther profile

Once, the panther ranged throughout Florida as well as throughout much of the southeastern United States from Louisiana north and east to Tennessee and the Atlantic. Today, less than 100 panthers remain in national and state parks and nearby private lands in Southwest Florida, making them among the most endangered animals in the world.

The Florida panther is smaller than cougars in the western United States and has longer legs, smaller feet and a shorter, darker coat. Male panthers are larger than female panthers. They weigh from 100 to 160 pounds; female panthers weigh between 65 and 100 pounds. Panthers vary in height at the shoulder from just under 2 feet to over 2.25 feet and measure from about 6 to 7 feet from nose to tip of tail.

The skull of the Florida panther is distinct from other subspecies of cougar. It is relatively broad and flat with highly arched nasal bones, giving the face a roman-nosed appearance.

The Florida panther also often has a right-angle crook between the second and third vertebrae from the end of its tail, a whorl of hair or a “cowlick” in the middle of its back and white flecks in the fur on its neck. The crook in the tail and the whorl of hair are the result of inbreeding within a small population and are not defining characteristics of the subspecies. Kinked tails and whorls have been reported in other subspecies of cougar, but less often. The white flecks in the coat on the neck are the result of tick bites.

Many animals, including Florida panthers, establish home ranges (an area they use habitually) for food, shelter, water and access to mates. Established male panthers have large, well-defined home ranges that overlap with those of females. Males are usually intolerant of the presence of other males within their ranges whereas females often share portions of their range, and sometimes even the entire range, with other females. The home range of male panthers is about 160-200 square miles and the home range of female panthers is 60-75 square miles.

Young males are often without an established home range. They are forced to live on the periphery of residents' home



ranges where prey is less abundant. They have to cover more territory to survive. Referred to as transients, these males usually are prevented by resident males from breeding. The death of an established male usually is required before a transient is able to establish a territory of his own and breed.

Panthers are strictly carnivores: they only eat meat. About 90 percent of their diet is feral hog, white-tailed deer, raccoon and armadillo. Occasionally, they consume rabbits, rats and birds, and on rare occasions, alligators. Two of their food items, feral hogs and armadillos, are not native to Florida. Although cattle are abundant on private ranches within the panther's range, they are rarely eaten by panthers.

To maintain their health and fitness, adult panthers need to consume the equivalent of one deer or hog per week. Females with kittens may need twice this amount. Juvenile kittens, like teenagers, need more food than younger kittens.

Panthers can live up to 12 years or more in the wild. Female kittens have a good chance of living 10 years or more. In 1998, one female panther in the wild was still alive at age 16. Males have a tougher time, but if they can survive 5 or 6 years, they are likely to live 10 or more years.

**Above:** By the time panther kittens are 2 to 3 weeks old, their eyes are open and they are able to move around the den. **Right:** When they are about 2 months old, kittens begin to accompany their mother on hunting forays. At first she hides them nearby while she hunts. After a kill, she leads them to the site where they all feed. A trail camera caught FP110 leading two of her kittens on an outing. At 6 months, kittens' spots are almost invisible and their blue eyes are turning amber.

