



News & Notes

Panther spotted in Naples neighborhood



MARK LOTZ

Florida panther experts guess that neighborhood dogs probably chased the young, male cat up in a tree in Naples' Golden Gate Estates neighborhood. The panther later jumped down on its own.

A young, male Florida panther wound up in a tree the morning of Oct. 30 in a residential area in Naples and was likely chased there by neighborhood dogs, according to the FWC.

Shortly after 8:30 a.m., FWC panther biologists and officers responded to 140 27th St. S.W. and confirmed the animal was a Florida panther, an endangered species rarely seen in populated areas. The cat jumped from the pine tree at 11:15 a.m. and ran east, then jumped a fence to the north and headed to a wooded area nearby.

"Sometimes wild animals wander into human territory. Usually, they figure out pretty quickly they aren't where they are supposed to be and return on their own to more-appropriate habitat," said Darrell Land, FWC panther biologist. "This panther never posed a threat to people and was not acting aggressively. It acted like a scared animal that was out of its element."

For more information on the Florida panther, visit MyFWC.com/panther.

Get outdoors, and get active

Step Up, Florida-On Our Way to Healthy Living! is a statewide campaign which promotes physical activity and healthy lifestyles for Floridians of all abilities throughout the month of February. All 67 counties in the state, through partnerships with county health departments, community organizations, and agencies like FWC, participate in this statewide celebration of active, healthy lifestyles.

Florida has many wonderful recreation destinations and opportunities to offer. Visit www.doh.state.fl.us/Family/Chronicdisease/walk_index.html for listings of 'Step Up Florida' activities in your area. Visit MyFWC.com/recreation for a multitude of recreation opportunities on FWC lands. Get outdoors, and get active!

Lake Seminole plays host to bass study

Seven thousand hatchery-reared largemouth bass, implanted with coded wire tags, were stocked in Pinellas County's Lake Seminole on Oct. 23. The 700-acre lake is playing host to a unique research project that will compare growth and survivability rates of stocked bass with those of wild largemouths.

"The ultimate goal of the study is to improve the survival rate of hatchery-reared largemouth bass, while enhancing the lake's fishery," said Bill Pouder, FWC fisheries biologist. "Our studies indicate Lake Seminole has a huge forage base capable of supporting a much larger bass population."

The FWC and the University of Florida (UF) have teamed up for the research project. FWC biologists will be sampling the lake and measuring growth rates at predetermined intervals of seven days, 30 days, 60 days and 90 days after the fish are stocked. A special wand that can detect the tiny, metal tags will be used to separate stocked bass from wild ones.

Bass for the study were produced at the FWC's Florida Bass Conservation Center, Richloam Fish Hatchery in Webster. The 7,000 fish average 6 inches in length.



FWC FILES

Largemouth bass being microwire tagged.

These fish are the same genetic strain of Florida largemouth bass found locally, which also should aid in improving survival.

Historically, largemouth bass have been cultured to fingerling sizes and stocked when they reach about 1.5 inches in length. Stocking

larger fish will enable them to feed on the high abundance of prey in the lake, which should increase survival. Because of fast growth rates of these bass, stocked fish should be of harvestable size – about 14 inches – by next year.

In spite of the advantages of stocking larger bass, producing them for stocking poses significant challenges. In the mid-1990s, FWC fish hatcheries developed techniques to train fingerling bass to eat commercial feeds. Unfortunately, there were no commercial diets available that met the specific nutritional needs of warm-water largemouths. The FWC enlisted the help of Dr. Paul Cardeilhac with the UF College of Veterinary Medicine to develop a specific diet for hatchery-raised Florida largemouth bass.

Diet formulations and research trials began in the spring of 2001 at the Richloam hatchery. Large groups of study fish are now fed new formulations based on results of studies from previous years. This nutritional work with largemouth bass represents the only work of its kind and may ultimately be utilized at warm-water fish hatcheries throughout the United States.

Missing Georgia boaters, dog rescued from Gulf

The FWC rescued three missing boaters and their dog around 3 p.m. Wednesday, Oct. 31.

The vessel, a 19-foot boat named *Snowbird*, had been reported missing when the boaters did not return after setting out for a fishing trip Sunday evening.

William J. Wetherington, 42, of Atlanta; his mother, Vannie Wetherington, 70, of Valdosta; and Kelly Trezek, 41, of Marietta, along with "Pugsley," were located and rescued. The search for the boaters began Tuesday evening, when they were reported overdue, according to FWC officials.

The FWC, U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) and the Taylor County Sheriff's Office searched the area until midnight Tuesday. The weather had deteriorated in the Gulf and the seas were rough. The search resumed at first light Wednesday.

Lt. Ken Mazzeo, captain of the FWC's *Guardian*, a 45-foot offshore patrol vessel stationed at Crystal River, said, "I plotted a search starting point at about 35 miles

offshore. While we were en route to the area, FWC pilot Frank Utermohlen located the vessel 32 miles offshore from Steinhatchee."

The *Guardian* was 12 miles from that location.

"We approached the vessel and saw three people and a dog on board. The two women appeared to be okay, however, the man needed medical attention," Mazzeo said. "We rescued everyone and secured them inside the *Guardian*. I requested a Coast Guard airlift to get Mr. Wetherington to medical help."

The USCG helicopter's estimated time of arrival wasn't known, so the *Guardian* continued on to Keaton Beach. Mazzeo knew he couldn't get the large FWC boat into the channel there, so he also requested emergency medical personnel be loaded on a smaller vessel to meet the *Guardian* once they got closer to shore.

"By the time the helicopter got there, we were only 2 miles from shore, so we decided not to transfer Mr. Wetherington to the aircraft. We met up with EMS personnel, and they were able to stabilize the patient while he was still aboard the *Guardian*," Mazzeo said.

boat with the two women, he buried his head in my chest and wouldn't look up. He was glad it was over. I carried him the rest of the way back to shore."

FWC officials state it appears the vessel's engine failed and had an improper anchor for the prevailing conditions. The boaters had drifted for several days. In addition, their flares did not work, their handheld-VHF had dead batteries, and their cell phone wasn't receiving a signal.

"The best safety tip I can give is to make sure you have all the proper, functioning equipment aboard, even if you're only going out for a short time.

These folks were just going out fishing for a few hours and fully intended on coming back to shore Sunday evening. But they ended up spending three nights out there," Mazzeo said. "This story has a happy ending, and I'm glad we found everyone when we did."

Cooper said, "Mrs. Wetherington told me during the ride back that their boat had started taking on water 30 minutes prior to our

aircraft locating them. She said they wouldn't have made it if the boat had gone down."

The teamwork among FWC, Taylor County Sheriff's Office and the USCG made this a successful rescue, Cooper said.

"Sea and weather conditions were extremely rough and hampered our local FWC assets' search abilities from going too far offshore," Cooper said. "With the addition of the aircraft, the *Guardian* and the FWC's intermediate class 32-foot Fincat, our capabilities were greatly improved."



TIM DONOVAN

A USCG helicopter lowers a rescue basket to the deck of an FWC patrol boat, the *Guardian*, during a training exercise.

Wetherington was then put aboard a smaller FWC patrol vessel and taken to a waiting ambulance. Trezek, Mrs. Wetherington and Pugsley were put aboard another FWC patrol vessel.

"Everyone on board was ecstatic to see us. After spending three nights out on the Gulf, I can certainly understand why," Mazzeo said. "And Pugsley was cool, too. He didn't seem to be suffering any ill effects whatsoever. Best of all, he was 'boat-broken.'"

FWC Lt. Bruce Cooper, incident commander during the search, said, "When Pugsley was transferred to my



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Hickory Mound improvements highlight partnership between FWC and Ducks Unlimited



ROBERT J. LA FOLLETTE

The red-breasted merganser prefers salt water more than the other two species of mergansers and may be found in the ocean, rivers and large lakes.

The improvements to the Hickory Mound Impoundment were officially recognized Oct. 16 when members of the FWC and Ducks Unlimited unveiled a sign at the area commemorating the project's partnerships.

The project was an upgrade of the impoundment dike and water control structures.

"The reconstruction of the impoundment dike was designed to allow this structure to withstand a 50-year storm event by drastically reducing the number of breaches that have occurred in the past," explained David Nicholson, district

biologist at the FWC Big Bend Field Office in Perry.

"These upgrades also give biologists better control over the flow of water into and out of the impoundment, allowing FWC staff to better manage waterfowl and other wildlife species. This increased management ability will produce higher quality recreational opportunities," Nicholson explained.

This project was funded by FWC, Ducks Unlimited, Taylor County and grants received from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and through the North American Wetlands Conservation Act, Nicholson said.

Nicholson gave a brief history of the impoundment during the ceremony.

"It was constructed in 1968 as a joint venture between Buckeye Cellulose Corporation, the landowner at the time, and the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission (GFC), currently the FWC," Nicholson said.

The primary goals were to enhance waterfowl habitat and waterfowl hunting opportunities. The impoundment also provides many other recreational opportunities, including crabbing, fishing and bird-watching.

"Even though the upgrades to the impoundment have not been tested by tropical systems, we feel this project is a success. Vandalism has been minimal, and the new water control structures are operating efficiently," Nicholson said. "This is a great resource for the visitors and residents of Taylor County."

Volunteers are invited to "Count for Fun, Count for the Future!"

Millions of novice and accomplished bird watchers can make their fascination with nature add up for science and for the future during the Great Backyard Bird Count, led by Audubon and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. During Presidents' Day weekend, February 15-18, 2008, anyone can count birds from wherever they are. These reports create an exciting real-time picture of where the birds are across the continent and contribute valuable information for science and conservation.

People of all ages and experience levels are invited to take part and count the highest number of each species they see during at least 15 minutes on one or more of the count days. Then they enter their tallies on the Great Backyard Bird Count Web site at www.birdcount.org.

The Web site provides helpful hints for identifying birds. Participants can compare results from their town or region with others, as checklists pour in from throughout the U.S. and Canada. They can also view bird photos taken by participants during the count and send in their own digital images for the online photo gallery and contest.

In 2007, Great Backyard Bird Count participants made history, breaking records for the number of birds reported, and the number of checklists. Participants sent in 81,203

checklists, tallying 11,082,387 birds of 613 species.

Already, the count results show how the numbers of some bird species have changed in recent years, such as a decline in northern pintails and an increase in hooded mergansers.

For more information on how to participate, including identification tips, photos, bird sounds, maps and information on over 500 bird species, visit www.birdcount.org.



THOMAS J. DUNKERTON

Eastern towhees are most often found in pine flatwoods, overgrown fields, woodland edges and residential areas with suitable groundcover. They forage on the ground and consume a variety of plant and animal matter.

Mystery creature may be fox squirrel

Speculation about a mystery creature in Baker County is running rampant. Stories run the gamut from an escaped ape to a juvenile “big foot,” according to media reports.

However, officials with the FWC said there may be another explanation – an orange phase fox squirrel.

FWC Officer Ken Holmes, the investigator on the mystery creature case, said the animal in question is not behaving like a primate, especially with all the nocturnal activity.

The first sighting of the mystery creature occurred at the end of October. A homeowner reported hearing and seeing something in a tree behind his house. Holmes went to investigate. Although the investigator acknowledges that there was something about 100 feet up in a pine tree in a nest-like structure, he was unable to identify it.

“I’m not discounting anything. However, this creature, whatever it may be, simply isn’t acting like a primate (ape),” Holmes said.

The next sighting was reported the following Wednesday when a homeowner reported hearing his dogs bark and a shadowy figure running across the roof of his dogs’ kennel late that night. The homeowner didn’t get a good look at the creature since it was dark.

On Thursday, Holmes went to the site and set up a culvert trap, baiting it with bananas and apples, which had been donated by KC’s Produce in Lake City.

“The trap was still empty Friday morning,” Holmes said. “However, the story attracted quite a crowd to the area, so the animal may have been simply avoiding the people.”

Holmes continues to monitor the situation.

“The possibility that it may be a fox squirrel is a good one,” Holmes said.

Holmes speculates that if the trap catches any wildlife, it will be of the native variety.



Fox squirrels are the largest species of tree squirrel. They have distinct color phases, ranging from reddish-brown to pale-grey backs and red to yellow-orange bellies. These animals can be about 2 feet in length when measuring the tail and body. They have broad tails, coarse, grizzled fur and short ears.

WILLIAM J. WEBER

Snail project delivers fast-food relief to endangered snail kite



JACK ROGERS

The South Florida Water Management District is supporting innovative research to learn if native apple snails can be cultured in large enough numbers to help replenish them in the wild. The snails are the primary food source for Florida’s endangered snail kite.

The district-funded project is showing signs of early success with the first batch of captive-raised snails already producing fertilized eggs and hatchlings at Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute in Fort Pierce. The \$100,000 study is being conducted by institute scientists who specialize in mollusk development and aquaculture.

Apple snail populations are at risk from the extended water shortage, making it more difficult for snail kites to find regular meals in Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades.

Depending on water levels, scientists hope to be able to release some of the captive-raised snails this spring into Lake Okeechobee, Lake Istokpoga or Everglades wetlands.

The snails typically lay their eggs on vegetation above the water line, but snail hatchlings must drop into the water to survive. The freshwater marshes at the lake’s edge are now too dry for the hatchlings, and Lake Okeechobee’s water level remains more than 5 feet below normal.

With brown shells serving as perfectly crafted camouflage, apple snails are hard to spot in the dark, marshy habitat where they spend most of their lives below the waterline. Despite the challenge, snail kites are experts at swooping low over the water to pluck the snails out of the dark waters. These crow-sized birds of prey have a hooked bill designed to pull the snails from their shells. A snail kite eats an average of 2.5 apple snails an hour when feeding.

More than 3,000 snails are being raised, with scientists exploring the best way to raise them in captivity for eventual release in the wild. Long-term study will include the survival and reproduction rates of captive snails that have been introduced to the wild, and how best to establish a breeding stock of snails.



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Anglers' Legacy reaches 20,000 pledge milestone

The Recreational Boating & Fishing Foundation (RBFF) announced in November that 20,000 anglers nationwide have taken the Anglers' Legacy Pledge. These Anglers' Legacy ambassadors, who are introducing new participants to the sport of fishing, are also giving back to the industry and resource.

"I am thrilled about the success of the Anglers' Legacy Program so far," said RBFF President and CEO Frank Peterson. "It is a true testament to the dedication and commitment of our ambassadors and Anglers' Legacy Program partners. We could not have reached this milestone without them."

Research conducted by RBFF revealed that on average, an ambassador takes more than four people fishing a year and generates an initial \$120 in fishing tackle and equipment sales, \$166 in boating supplies and accessories and purchases 3.2 fishing licenses.

"At 20,000 pledges, this means the program may have generated \$5.7 million for the boating and fishing industries and 64,000 new fishing licenses for states," said Peterson.

Launched in May 2006, Anglers' Legacy aims to collect 50,000 pledges by March 2008. Through media coverage, industry partners and pro-staff and celebrity angler involvement, the program asks avid anglers to share their passion for fishing and to visit AnglersLegacy.org, where they're asked to "Take the Pledge" - promising to take one new person fishing each year.

RBFF is a nonprofit organization established to increase participation in recreational angling and boating. RBFF helps people discover, share and protect the legacy of boating and fishing through national outreach programs, including the Take Me Fishing Campaign and Anglers' Legacy.

FWC confiscates six big cats in Inverness

FWC officials confiscated five tigers and a lion from a big-cat facility in Inverness on Nov. 9.

FWC Investigator Ken Holmes said the cats were removed from a facility owned by Susan Mackay.

Because of continual violations at the facility, the FWC sent Mackay a notice of intent to revoke her license on Aug. 23.

Warnings to the facility began in August 2005, when an inspection

revealed two cages were too small for the animals. Some of the cages had standing water, and two were completely flooded.

After multiple inspections, citations and court orders during 2006, Holmes conducted another inspection on Feb. 20, 2007, and found all of the cages were unsanitary, and the big cats were thin. No law enforcement action was taken at the time, but Holmes recommended revocation and/or non-renewal of Mackay's captive wildlife license.

On May 29, Holmes and three officials with the USDA inspected Mackay's facility. All the big cats were very thin, and the inspectors were particularly concerned about a male white tiger. The inspectors noted the facility was more sanitary than in previous inspections, but it still did not meet minimum regulatory standards.

The USDA requested Holmes to assist in the seizure of one male tiger on June 29. Mackay had failed to comply with USDA regulations of veterinary care on the tiger. The male tiger was seized by the USDA and transported to Busch Gardens.

Mackay received a notice of intent to revoke the facility's license

on Aug. 23. It stipulated she had 90 days to place her big cats at a lawful facility. She was advised she could request an administrative hearing, but did not respond.

"On Nov. 9, we performed a welfare check on the animals. All the

cats - a male orange tiger, four female white tigers and a female lion - were in poor health," Holmes said. "The animals were in worse condition than on any previous inspection, and

we estimated they were at half their normal body weight. Also, the cages were not cleaned, scrubbed or raked as required.

"Based on the animals' current poor condition, their immediate health needs, and Mackay's persistent failure to provide proper care for the animals, the decision was made to seize the five tigers and the lion. Vernon Yates, from Wildlife Rescue and Rehab, Inc., was contacted. He has the experience and caging space to temporarily board the animals. He also had the transport equipment needed," Holmes said.

Yates transferred the big cats to his facility in Pinellas County. Yates reported that the cats were eating, but there were parasites visible in their feces. Yates' veterinarian was scheduled to examine the animals and treat them as necessary, Holmes said.

"The animals need to be brought to a healthy weight before they are transported to another location," Holmes said. "We are asking that the animals be turned over to the FWC for permanent placement, and for Mr. Yates to be compensated for the cats' transportation and boarding costs."

Charges are pending against Mackay.



ROBERT J. LA FOLLETTE

Slain officer's memorial dedicated at Brooker Creek Preserve



Twenty-three years after her brutal murder in northern Pinellas County, the life of wildlife officer Margaret E. "Peggy" Park still has a significant impact on family, friends and fellow officers. A polished stone marker, located only yards from where she lost her life, was dedicated to her memory on Oct. 8.

Located at Brooker Creek Preserve, the monument commemorates Park's dedication and sacrifice to conservation. The marker was placed through the efforts of Pinellas County's Environmental Lands Division.

Park's family, friends, a representative from the governor's office, other government officials, law enforcement officers, fire and rescue personnel, and local land managers – some who knew her well – were in attendance.

"My family and I are very moved, and we appreciate

the efforts of all the people who have worked to create and dedicate a memorial to Peggy," said Betsy Park, younger sister to Park. "Keeping her memory alive is of paramount importance to us."

Park, a Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission wildlife officer, was alone on routine patrol off Keystone Road on the night of Dec. 3, 1984. She discovered two men stealing copper wire from a power substation. Park confronted the two, who then knocked her to the ground and wrestled her service revolver from her.

A detailed investigation into Park's murder resulted in the men being caught, convicted and sent to prison.

At the time of her funeral, Park's ashes were scattered over a favorite spot she visited frequently: an eagle's nest near the memorial site. She now keeps eternal watch over that which she loved so dearly.

"She was a stellar officer – hardworking, dedicated and professional. She was missed at the time of her death over two decades ago, and she is still missed today," said Col. Julie Jones, director of the Division of Law Enforcement for FWC.

Dixie Plantation plays key role for red-cockaded woodpeckers

A 9,000-acre Jefferson County plantation is the first private property in Florida to enroll in the Safe Harbor Program for the red-cockaded woodpecker, according to FWC officials.

Dixie Plantation becomes part of this national conservation program that provides landowners management flexibility, while ensuring a conservation benefit for endangered or threatened species found on their property.

The Safe Harbor Program provides assurances that no additional regulatory restrictions will result if a landowner is able to increase woodpecker populations on his property.

As a listed species, the red-cockaded woodpecker is protected by federal regulations under the Endangered Species Act, and many landowners are concerned about land-use restrictions they may be subject to if a listed species colonizes their property or the species' numbers increase.

"Participating landowners don't have to fear that success in increasing the population of red-cockaded woodpeckers will add more regulatory restrictions that will limit the future use of their land," said Jennifer Perkins, program coordinator.

Last year, the FWC and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) launched Florida's red-cockaded woodpecker Safe Harbor Program, the first statewide program of its kind for any species. This program provides the opportunity for FWC to partner with private landowners in recovering the species and builds critical conservation partnerships among landowners, the FWC and FWS. Florida was the seventh state to enter into a Safe Harbor Program for red-cockaded woodpeckers.

The woodpeckers are about 8 inches in size and black



FWC biologist Robin Boughton prepares a young red-cockaded woodpecker for translocation to another property. Using a net, biologists capture the birds from their cavities in live pine trees and move them to other areas to increase the likelihood of the species' survival.

and white in color. They make their nests in cavities they create in mature pine trees, making it the only southeastern bird that excavates cavities in living pines. Each family group needs at least 75 acres of open pine forest to forage.

An estimated 97 percent of red-cockaded woodpecker habitat has been lost in the Southeast United States in the past 200 years as a result of logging, agriculture, development and fire suppression.

For more information on the Safe Harbor Program, visit MyFWC.com/safeharbor.

TIM DONOVAN