

Plight of the Florida Panthers

Graham Segger, Burnt Store Marina

A short snippet in a January issue of the Fort Myers News-Press caught my attention recently. It reported that a record number of critically endangered Florida Panthers died in 2016. Of the 42 reported deaths, 34 were the result of being hit by cars, this despite attempts to reduce night time speed limits in their Everglades habitat (panthers are primarily nocturnal). Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) also reported that 14 new cubs were born in the wild in 2016 from six litters and that the estimated total cats in the wild was somewhere between 100 and 180. The Florida panther (*puma concolor coryi*) is categorized by the International Union for Conservation of Nature as facing a very high risk of extinction in the wild.

The Florida panther is a large, slender cat, tawny above and whitish below. The tip of the tail, back of the ears and parts of the face are highlighted with dark brown or black. Sexes look alike. Kittens exhibit distinct black spots on a buffy background until they are 9 to 12 months old. Lengths and weights vary from 75 inches and 70 to 100 pounds for females to 86 inches and 110 to 160 pounds for males. Front pad widths of adult panthers range from 1.5 to 2.0 inches and 2.0 to 2.5 inches for females and males, respectively. It is often mistaken for the smaller bobcat (*Felis rufus*), whose coat is spotted and tail is much shorter. The Florida panther is the State animal as chosen over the alligator, manatee and Key deer by a 1981 vote of the state's school children. [Source – floridapanther.com]



Credit: David Shindle for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (used with permission)

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A colleague in Burnt Store Marina recently reported spotting what he was fairly sure was a panther in the vicinity of the water treatment plant just across Burnt Store Road from Vincent Avenue. If in fact this was a panther, it could have been one of several young males who have swum across the Caloosahatchee in recent years and become separated from their traditional breeding grounds. On November 14, 2016 the Florida FWC issued a press release stating that they had found evidence of a female panther in Charlotte County, the first time in over 40 years that a female had been detected north of the Caloosahatchee. If you wish to see a Florida panther in person, a female, blinded by a shotgun blast and therefore unable to return to the wild, is resident at the Naples Zoo.

Cars, inbreeding, and attacks by dominant male cats are the three most serious threats to the remaining stock of panthers, all indirectly caused by habitat loss. A breeding program using eight female, close cousin Texas cougars (also referred to as pumas), has addressed some of the genetic challenges, but this does beg the question, are the offspring still purely "Florida" panthers. It was, however, man the hunter who must bear most of the responsibility for the decline of the subspecies. The following account of a panther encounter just north of Arcadia on Horse Creek demonstrates this point. It is paraphrased from an article in a 1959 issue of The Tampa Tribune describing a hog hunt in the 1870's by legendary Florida pioneer Thomas H. Albritton (1818-1907).

Thomas and several of his neighbors went out onto the prairie on their horses with their hunting dogs but had not carried guns with them. The dogs jumped a panther (called a "tiger" or "painter" in those days) and chased the panther into a tree. One of the men went back to the homestead for a muzzleloader to kill the cat even though panthers are not regular livestock killers, and attacks on humans are uncommon.

The dogs then cornered another panther which, rather than climb a tree, retreated into a saw palmetto patch and began fighting the dogs. Thomas Albritton was concerned for his dogs so shouted "boys, I'm not going to let that tiger kill my dogs". He waded into the fray and began pummeling the panther with his fists, assisted by the pack of dogs, and finally killed it with his knife. Shortly after, the gun arrived and was used to shoot the second panther. Both heads were removed and turned in for bounties. The location of the panther fight is still known today as Tiger Hammock.

Anyone still doubting Albritton's virility will be reassured by the information from a 1906 Punta Gorda Herald article which stated that Polk County patriarch Mr. T.H. Albritton, who married three times, has 170 living descendants: 12 children, 80 grandchildren, 76 great-grandchildren and 2 great-great-grandchildren and that he is still as active as a man of 30.

The Florida Panthers NHL hockey team of Miami was also thought to be close to extinction a couple of years ago, and likely to be transferred to Quebec City. The team seems to have made a minor recovery and may have gained a reprieve with average home game attendance now up to 14,600.