

2007 Interagency Florida Panther Response Team Report

In 2004, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), National Park Service (NPS), and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) established an Interagency Florida Panther Response Team (Response Team) to respond to human-panther interactions. The Interagency Florida Panther Response Plan (Response Plan) was developed to provide guidelines for responding to these interactions. Also included in the plan is an outreach strategy that provides goals and objectives for educating the public. The draft Response Plan has been the guiding document for the Response Team since February 2005.

The Response Plan requires that the Response Team meet at least once a year to review the past year's activities and suggest revisions to the Response Plan, if needed. The results of the annual meeting are to be provided in a comprehensive report to the Oversight Committee consisting of the FWS Southeast Regional Director, the FWS Refuge Manager of Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), the NPS Southeast Regional Director, the NPS Superintendent of Everglades National Park, the NPS Superintendent of Big Cypress National Preserve, and the FWC Executive Director. The Oversight Committee will review and approve revisions to the Response Plan, review actions by the Response Team and provide guidance if warranted.

Because this is the first annual report, the reporting period is December 2003 through June 2007. In future years, the report period will be July 1 through June 30. The annual Response Team meeting will be held in conjunction with the annual panther capture meeting, which is scheduled in early October. The final report will be provided to the Oversight Committee by October 31.

A response team meeting was held on December 4, 2006 at Big Cypress National Preserve to discuss the draft Response Plan and to refine reporting and coordination procedures. The annual meeting was held on October 3, 2007 at the headquarters office of Florida Panther NWR. The annual report was finalized and sent to the Oversight Committee on October 29, 2007. No comments were received from committee members.

Response Plan Revisions

Review of the current draft of the Response Plan revealed inconsistencies under the "Incident" and "Threat" classifications in the timeline for reporting to the Response Team after the initial site visit. The following changes were made:

- Under "Incident", no reporting time was stated, so "no later than 12 hours after receiving the report" was added;
- Under "Threat", the reporting time was changed from 12 hours to "immediately" after the initial site visit.

These revisions were made prior to approval by the Oversight Committee because these changes were minor and needed to be incorporated into the revised Environmental Assessment for the Interagency Florida Panther Response Plan, which is scheduled to be available for public review through the *Federal Register* the week of October 29.

Changes were recommended for the public interview and field investigation report forms. These changes were based on experience gained during the past year with the current forms. Revisions were made to improve the type and quality of information gathered during the initial interview and investigation process. The revised forms emphasize the importance of gathering pertinent information that is needed to fully evaluate and classify the event as an interaction (sighting, encounter, incident, threat, or attack) or depredation.

Human-Panther Interactions/Depredation Reports

Four classifications of interactions were documented during the reporting period: one area of repeated sightings, two encounters, a threat, and 16 depredations. The repeated sightings occurred in the Pinecrest area within Big Cypress National Preserve and were investigated by team members. All reported depredations and encounters were investigated as soon as possible by law enforcement and/or biologists. The threat classification was the result of repeated depredations and significant behavioral changes by one panther. Once the threat classification was determined, the team acted immediately to remove the animal. Details on these interactions follow.

Sightings

A sighting or repeated sightings, by their very nature, cannot be substantiated unless the animal leaves some sort of evidence, such as tracks that can be verified by researchers, or a clear photograph is obtained. Therefore, most sighting reports lead simply to an education opportunity.

However, starting in December 2003, several panthers were sighted around the community of Pinecrest on Loop Road (within the Big Cypress National Preserve). In February 2004, a female (FP 124) and two sub-adult kittens (FP125, FP 126) were radio-collared in this area. From 2004-2006, FP 124 and her offspring were sighted periodically in Pinecrest. Due to her proximity to human structures, aversive conditioning was applied on several occasions. High concentrations of deer, especially near the NPS Loop Road Environmental Education Center, attracted the panthers to this area. Deer-proof fencing was installed around this facility in November 2006. Since then, deer no longer concentrate in this area and there have been very few panther sightings in Pinecrest.

Two indisputable sightings were corroborated by an FWC panther biologist. On February 4, 2007, a panther was observed lying on the ground near a residence for several minutes before getting up and walking off into the darkness. The residence was located within the suburban wildland interface near Naples, west of I-75. The second sighting on May 2, 2007 involved a panther being treed by a neighborhood dog near

apartments and houses, just outside the Naples city limits. The panther came down after the dog and bystanders were removed from the area.

Encounter

An encounter classification involves an unexpected direct meeting between a human and a panther in which the panther displays a lack of wariness to humans and does not approach, or shows signs of curiosity, but retreats.

Two encounters were documented during the reporting period. On March 8, 2006, two men on McDaniel Ranch in Hendry County were in camouflage clothing, in a concealed position, hunting turkeys when they were approached by a panther family. The yearlings (two) got within 25 feet of the hunters. The mother called to the young and all of them left the area. This encounter was confirmed by Roy McBride. An unconfirmed encounter occurred on October 21, 2006 on Turner River Road in Ochopee. A woman had just finished mowing her friend's yard and sat down on bench in the yard when she heard breathing behind her. A panther was standing 15 feet away and was walking toward her. She stood up and waved her arms and the panther walked away. The encounter was investigated by team members the following day, but no panther sign was found.

Depredation

A depredation is classified as domestic livestock or pets being killed by a panther. Sixteen depredations were investigated and confirmed that a panther was involved in attacking or killing domestic animals between June 2004 and May 2007 (Attachment 1). Some notable depredations are discussed below:

- In June 2004, FP60 was responsible for the depredation of several goats and emus at the Trail Lake Campground. The panther was captured on June 29 and found to be injured, possibly due to a vehicle collision; consequently, the panther was permanently placed in captivity due to its injury under Section 10(a)(1)(A) of the Endangered Species Act.
- Four separate depredations, including a turkey, chickens, a goose, a hog and an injured dog were caused by FP 79 in January-February 2006. Various management techniques were tried to discourage FP 79, including aversive conditioning and capturing and relocating the animal within his home range; however, he returned to his capture site within a few days and continued to take domestic animals. At this point, FP 79 met the criteria for a "threat" because his behavior was a departure from expected or known behavior and the team's management actions did not alter its behavior; consequently he was captured and permanently placed in captivity.
- Four depredation events occurred north of I-75 in the Belle Meade area between July 2006 and February 2007. Pictures taken by some of the livestock owners showed a

male panther of similar body shape and age to a male panther (UCFP94¹) that was hit and killed by a vehicle on I-75 in April 2007 in proximity to where these depredations occurred. Since his death, there have been no reported depredations north of I-75. At one site both male and female panther tracks were discovered but a link indicting either panther could not be confirmed.

Investigation of the depredations and encounters included providing safety tips/brochures on living in panther habitat to the livestock/pet owner and witnesses. Every attempt was made to confirm the presence of panthers at the scenes by either track or photo evidence (several owners documented panthers with remote cameras). Livestock/pet owners (and neighbors) were provided information on proper husbandry practices to protect their animals from depredation. Some owners willingly improved their livestock enclosures, while others refused. When properly protected, livestock depredations stopped.

Summary of Outreach Accomplishments

A Florida Panther Outreach Working Group, a group of government and private organizations, was created in 2006 to develop and promote various types of outreach opportunities and materials for communities and recreational areas that are located within panther-occupied habitat. The outreach group accomplished a variety of projects:

- The working group developed and published “A Guide to Living with Florida Panthers” brochure. This brochure discusses how to live and recreate safely in panther country and has been provided to local landowners and/or livestock/pet owners that have experienced depredations or other human-panther interactions. Additionally, the brochure is available to local residents and visitors through several local, state and federal agencies and private organizations.
- The working group sponsored two community meetings during the past year. In November 2006, a meeting was held with residents of Golden Gate Estates. In February 2007, a similar meeting was held in Everglades City. These meetings were facilitated by the local county commissioner. Both meetings were well attended.
- From March 10-17, 2007 “Save the Panther” week was celebrated by partnering agencies and organizations in various venues throughout southwest Florida. The focus of the celebration was educating local residents and visitors about Florida panthers, including how to safely live and recreate in panther habitat. Outreach partners were successful in getting Florida Governor Crist to proclaim March 17 as “Save the Florida Panther Day” and the Collier County Board of County Commissioners to recognize March 10-17 as “Save the Florida Panther Week”.
- In May 2007, the outreach group, led by NPS, conducted a 4-H workshop at the Collier County Extension Service.

¹ UCFP94 = Uncollared Florida Panther 94

- Defenders of Wildlife organized the building of three livestock pens on June 2-3, 2007. Nearly 40 volunteers, including local residents and members of the outreach working group, participated. Two of the pens were constructed at private residences in Golden Gate Estates and one was constructed at the Collier County Extension Service as a demonstration pen for the general public. This event was covered by the local media and the local county commissioner visited the residential sites. The objective of this activity was to promote using easy-to-build pens to protect livestock and pets, decreasing the opportunities for depredation by predators.
- Informational signs on Florida panthers have been developed and placed as needed in Big Cypress National Preserve.
- Agency and partnering organizations updated their web sites to include links and information on living with Florida panthers.

Future plans include utilizing a panther exhibit from the old A.R.M. Loxahatchee NWR visitor center to create a new exhibit at the Collier County Extension Service; working with Defenders of Wildlife to distribute educational material to residents living in areas frequented by panthers: participating in the Collier County fair with an interagency booth focusing on Florida panthers; translating the brochure, “A Guide to Living with Florida Panthers” into Spanish; continuing town hall meetings as needed; developing a “Living with Florida Panthers” slide presentation that can be used by staff/volunteers and presented to local community and civic organizations; developing standardized signage on Florida panthers for public lands within panther habitat; working with Home Depot to develop a standard livestock pen kit; and continuing the “Save the Panther” week activities.

Summary

As the population continues to grow in the rural fringe communities in Collier and Hendry counties, there will be more instances of sightings, encounters, and depredations in these areas. Educating the livestock/pet owners about proper husbandry practices will continue to be a priority.

The team recognizes that timely reporting of these interactions to its members is still a challenge. The team would like to institute a web-based reporting method, but currently Department of Interior computer security requirements are hampering the development of this system. To develop this reporting system will require a commitment from the three agencies to create a compatible reporting or file-sharing system. Such a system would greatly facilitate reporting and timely coordination between all members.

Attachment 1. Depredations and Map (June 2004- May 2007)

Event #	Interaction Date	Location	Name	Animals Depredated	Panther Involved	Comments
1	6/4/2004	Trail Lakes campground, Ochopee	Shealy	goats, emus	FP60	FP60 began frequenting campground in early June; movements restricted to this area until capture/removal on 29 June; found injuries consistent with vehicle collision
2	12/12/2005	Stokes Avenue, Immokalee	Anderson	dog	Unknown male	Land found male track at residence; dog killed
3	1/27/2006	27303 Turner River Road, Ochopee	Mayberry	dog	FP79	McBride, Jansen found male tracks; collar seen by owner; FP79 nearby; dog injured
4	2/9/2006	Trail Lakes campground, Ochopee	Shealy	turkey, chicken	FP79	McBride, Jansen identified tracks; FP79 nearby
5	2/14/2006	Birdon Road, Ochopee	Hodges	chicken, goose	FP79	FP79 seen by FWC LE and by radio signal
6	2/16/2006	Copeland		hog	FP79	Implicated by presence, tracks, and manner of kill
7	7/16/2006	2600 Jenkins Way, Naples	Sistrunk	goat	Uncollared male (UCFP94?)	FWC Officer Caraker investigated. Pictures of male panther tracks with dead goat.
8	8/1/2006	2551 Inez Rd, Naples	Lolly	donkey	Uncollared male (UCFP94?)	Owner contacted FWC 3 weeks after attack; donkey survived; days following the attack, owner saw panther and got pictures with remote cameras; owner also secured donkey well and no more attacks
9	9/8/2006	1840 Blue Sage Rd, Naples	Tseng	goat	Uncollared male (UCFP94?)	Panther killed goat in flimsy shed; dragged 150 yds. Away; owner claims 6 lost goats during previous 6 months
10	2/17/2007	2755 Inez Rd, Naples	Smith/Lolly	goats	Uncollared male (UCFP94?)	No complaint from Smith but Lolly alerted FWC to situation.
11	2/20/2007	1655 56th Ave SE, Naples	Acosta	goats, sheep, emus	Uncollared male	Found kills
12	4/21/2007	284 Sabal Palm Rd, Naples	Salyer	goat	FP146	Confirmed by male tracks and eaten goat. FP146 directly across from property.

Event #	Interaction Date	Location	Name	Animals Depredated	Panther Involved	Comments
13	4/30/2007	1655 56th Ave SE, Naples	Acosta	emu, goats	Uncollared male, uncollared female	2 missing goats not found, 1 dead emu, 2 injured goats (1 paralyzed)
14	5/5/2007	2430 Desoto Blvd, Naples	Ballard	goat	Uncollared male	Carcass found cached, photos
15	5/16/2007	284 Sabal Palm Rd, Naples	Salyer	goat	Uncollared male/FP146?	Track and panther hair found near fence, goat never found
16	5/27/2007	284 Sabal Palm Rd, Naples	Salyer	goat	Unknown male	Male tracks found, goat carcass found with typical panther feeding pattern

