# Big Cypress

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Big Cypress
National Preserve

Photo courtesy of Ralph Arwood, NPS/VIP

## The Florida Panther

*The Florida panther (Felis concolor coryi) is the state animal of Florida, being voted as such by the school children of the state in 1987. The panther was chosen over other animals such as the alligator, manatee, white-tailed deer, and the black bear as the best representative of Florida fauna. The panther is without a doubt the most formidable predator in Florida. Habitat loss has made the panther one of the most endangered animals in North America.*

The Florida panther has embodied the natural landscape of Florida for many thousands of years. An elusive creature that is seldom seen by human eyes, the panther stalks the sawgrass prairies and pinelands of the Big Cypress Swamp. Silently ambushing its prey, the panther is a master of the swamp, helping to efficiently keep the wild game populations healthy.

### Home in the Swamp

It is no secret to cat owners that felines dislike water yet here in Big Cypress, water, the most abundant resource, is a pivotal aspect of the panther's life. Where most other cats would starve based on their fear of water, the panther has adapted to life around our watery world. Inhabiting higher and drier pinelands and hardwood hammocks, the panther regularly interacts with all aspects of the swamp. It will make dens in the dense saw palmetto, lie in wait in the sawgrass prairies, forge through the wet cypress strands, and spend lazy days in the shade of the hardwood hammocks.

### Food Sources

While there is an abundance of aquatic life within the Big Cypress Swamp, the panther prefers a more terrestrial meal. The white-tailed deer of South Florida make up the main diet of the panther, but it will also hunt for wild hog, raccoons, rabbits, armadillos, and birds. While it may feed on these smaller animals, the larger the prey that it feeds on, the healthier the panther will be. For example a panther would need to feed on ten raccoons to equal the nourishment from one deer. In order to maintain proper health the panther must kill one deer per week on average. The panther will lie in wait, or patiently stalk, waiting for the right moment to pounce out of its hiding spot and seize its prey. Using retractable razor sharp claws to hold its prey, it will usually bite the back of the neck, and in one quick movement break the neck. These tawny brown colored animals are most active at dawn and dusk, factors that enhance camouflage among the sawgrass prairies in the dim light.

### Fun Panther Facts

- The panther is a sub-species of the cougar and is also known as the puma, mountain lion, catamount, or painter.
- The panther once roamed from Texas to Florida to the northern part of Tennessee.
- Panthers can live to be 10 years of age or older.
- Panthers do not normally spend much time in trees, although many pictures depict them this way. They are merely trying to escape the scientists who are tracking them.
- The panther is the only sub-species of the cougar which can be found east of the Mississippi River.

## Mating and Reproduction

A female panther will reach the age of sexual maturity by the time she is two and a half years of age, while the male is usually three years. The females will signal they are ready for copulation by scent, or by caterwauling, a yowl that is so loud and shrill that many people mistake the scream for that of a human woman. This has earned the panther the name of the swamp screamer. The female will remain pregnant for around three months and have a litter of one to three kittens. The kittens are born with many spots on their coats, which are used as camouflage while bedding in their den of saw palmetto. The mother needs to regularly leave the den to hunt for the extra food needed for her young, so the kittens must be safe and hiding maintains this security. By the time the kittens are two months old they will begin traveling out with the mother to learn how to hunt. While they are born with the instinct to chase prey, the proper methods of hunting must be learned.

## Decline of a Population

During the later part of the 1800s many hunters sought out the panther due to the belief panthers were taking many farmers' livestock. Florida has always been a major producer of the country's cattle, therefore the panthers were hunted in record numbers in order to protect these livestock. To encourage the elimination of the panther, a $5 bounty was placed on all panthers, which led to a widespread loss of panthers across the state. This occurence coupled with a major habitat loss brought the panthers to the brink of extinction. At one point the estimated number of panthers in the wild was down to around 30. This was also a major problem because it caused record numbers of the panthers to inbreed. The inbreeding caused many genetic deficiencies such as cowlicks, bent tails, and sterility. Their entire future was in serious jeopardy.

## What is Being Done?

The passing of the Endangered Species Act of 1973 allowed the panthers their first step towards revitalization. The panther was among the first animals in the United States to be placed on the list. They were immediately afforded federal protection, but this did not mean their numbers started to grow immediately. Initially a few female cougars were introduced from Texas to add genetic diversity to the remaining population of panthers in Florida. The Texas cougars were returned after two years, but the introduction allowed the Florida panthers to start to revitalize their population. There are currently between 80 and 100 cats left in the wild. Nearly a third of this population's territory ranges within Big Cypress National Preserve. The biggest problem for the panthers to date is habitat loss and highway collisions. More than any other reason, collisions with cars are the main contributor to the panthers' population decline today. In 2007, 17 panthers were hit and killed by cars in South Florida. In an effort to limit the interaction of the panthers and cars, fencing has been installed along Alligator Alley and Highway 29. This fencing leads to underpasses that allow the wildlife to cross the highways without risk of being hit by passing motorists.

The National Park Service works in conjunction with other agencies to study the panther in order to better protect these natural areas. A current plan includes fitting many panthers with radio tracking collars to better understand their day-to-day movement. The panthers are initially tracked down by members of the National Park Service and tranquilized, fitted with a radio collar, given shots of antibiotics, blood samples are taken, and measurements are made. This data helps to secure more effective ways of preserving the panther. The better the information collected, the better chance that the panthers may survive.

## Did you know?

There is no such animal as a black panther. The black cats commonly referred to as such are black due to a melanistic gene found in jaguars and leopards of Latin America and Southeast Asia. A melanistic cat has an abundance of coloring pigment in it's fur that causes it to appear all black. It is the opposite of albinism where there is a complete lack of coloring pigments.

## References

U.S. Fish and Wildlife, www.fws.gov/species/species_accounts/bio_alli.html

Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission, www.myfwc.com/gators/

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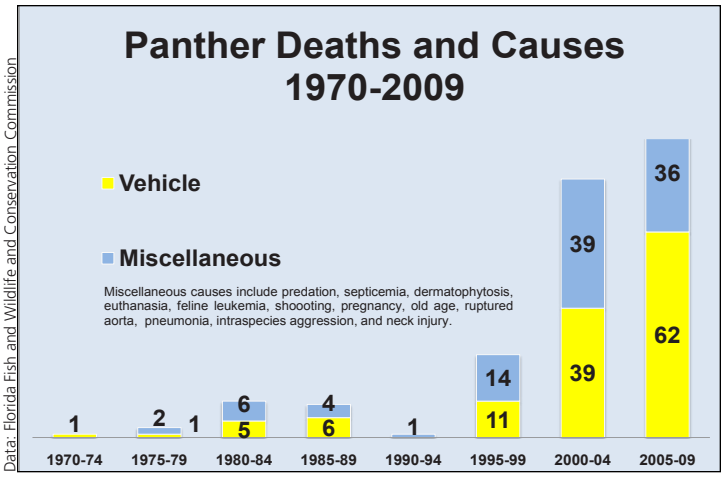


Data: Florida Fish and Wildlife and Conservation Commission

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**A panther kitten warns an intruder to the den.**



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