

Cat Fancy Interview 9/18/2011

What is your name and Title?

Thomas Trotta, President

What is the Name and location of your Organization?

Friends of the Florida Panther Refuge, a 501(c)(3) organization. Headquarters: Naples. FL

Can you tell me about the Florida Panther?

What it looks like - Are There Black Panthers?

Florida panther kittens are spotted and have five rings on their tails. Their eyes open at approximately three weeks and are blue. As they mature their coats become a uniform tan that changes to a grayish white on their bellies, inner legs and throat. The color does vary in individuals; the tan coat can be more greyish or reddish. The blue eyes turn amber.

Panther sightings are usually in dim light and at times the animal's coat is wet. Under these conditions especially at a distance they can appear black. However Florida panthers

are never black. “Black panthers” relates to a small percentage of spotted cats such as leopards and jaguars that are black.

How much it weighs etc.?

Male panthers in general are larger than females. They weigh from 100 to 160 lbs. at maturity and females from 70 to 100 lbs. The height at the shoulders is 24 to 27” and the length is from 6 to 7’ from the tip of the nose to the tip of the tail. Their black-tipped tails are long, almost $\frac{2}{3}$ the length of their bodies.

How is the Florida Panther different than the other species of Panthers which I know have different names – Eastern Cougar, Western Mountain Lion, South American Puma?

Florida panthers (*Puma concolor coryi*) are a subspecies of pumas (*Puma concolor*). Another puma subspecies, the Eastern cougar (*Puma concolor cougar*) that lived in the northeast U.S., is extinct. Pumas are widely distributed from Canada to the tip of South America.

Is the Florida Panther Smaller than these other species?

The Florida panther is smaller than other pumas in North America, but with longer legs. The skull also differs with a flat and broad nasal bone.

How many Florida Panthers exist in the wild today?

There are between 100 and 160 Florida panthers in the wild and very few in captivity. Counting panthers is difficult as you might imagine and this leads to uncertainty, but there are less than 160.

How Endangered are they?

The Florida panther is considered an endangered species by Federal and Florida state law. They are one of the most threatened animals in the world.

Is the Florida Panther Still Being Hunted?

No, it is a crime to purposely kill a Florida panther under federal and Florida law.

What are the biggest threats to the Florida Panther?

The greatest threat to Florida panthers is loss of habitat. Suitable denning sites are especially important. Female panthers den in specific types of areas that are dry and contain thick brush. Because of these denning habits young

females do not wander far, as males do, to find new territories. There are denning sites and adequate prey in various areas of the historic range. These areas are not continuous with the existing breeding area. Therefore female panthers will not move into these prime habitats. Fragmentation of habitat in their current range will further reduce the population.

An immediate threat is contamination of the land. Parts of their range are contaminated with exotic species that make it unsuitable for panthers. These exotics are mainly plants but animals such as Burmese pythons are cause for concern. An introduced disease could spread through the small population and that would be devastating. There are contaminants such as mercury that concentrate through the food chain and weaken and even kill panthers under certain conditions.

The greatest cause of panther death most years is vehicle collisions. Though wildlife underpasses have reduced collisions the majority of roads in primary panther habitat do not have underpasses. Increased awareness, panther speed zones and more underpasses are needed.

There are many issues that impact panthers but that might be too long for this article.

What is your organization doing to help save the Florida Panther?

We are a Friends group for the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge, our mission is to promote the Refuge and support their goals. We accomplish our mission by sponsoring activities, providing volunteers, raising funds for projects and educating the public and elected officials.

Public outreach and education is an important goal for us. East of Naples in Collier County there is a large rural area of one to three acre housing plots. It is partially built out and contains habitat used by panthers. This land borders the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge. We have programs to educate the community on how to live with panthers and other wildlife such as bears and alligators. Most importantly if they have livestock such as chickens and goats how they can protect them at night with enclosures.

We participate in and sponsor functions in the community. As an example, we are co-sponsoring the First Annual Florida Panther Festival in October of this year. This event will have

fun activities, presentations by panther biologists, and the chance for people to learn about panthers from the experts. We have volunteers that attend activities throughout our area distributing educational materials and promoting panther conservation.

We provide funds used to purchase equipment for panther studies. We are now in the process of helping equip the Refuge biologists with trip cameras to study prey densities. We hope in the future that through donations and grants we can restore abandoned farm land within the refuge to add productive habitat for wildlife.

We also speak at congressional hearings to support funding for our Refuge and other refuges around the country.

Are you working with local people to help save the panther and if so how?

The Friends group continuously works with local residents and leaders on panther issues. We serve on the Florida panther outreach team, which is a multi-partner effort to coordinate panther outreach efforts in south Florida. We are also one of nine organizations and agencies to create and host the Florida Panther Festival to be held on October 29,

2011. We also work with Florida Gulf Coast University's Wings of Hope program, which educates thousands of school children every year in its "Panther Posse" program.

Where does the Panther live in Florida?

The historical range of Florida panthers stretched across the southeast United States from Arkansas to North Carolina. This included all of Florida. Today approximately five percent of the historic land is still used by Florida panthers.

The breeding population of Florida panthers is restricted to Florida south of Lake Okeechobee. This range starts in southeast Everglades National Park and stretches northwest through southwest Florida to private ranches near the lake.

Male panthers will wander great distances searching for territory. Occasionally, male panthers are found far from the breeding range. A few years ago it was confirmed that a male panther found in Central Georgia was born near Naples, Florida.

Do they live in the Florida Everglades or other swamp like regions?

Florida panthers utilize a variety of habitat from uplands to swamps across south Florida. Their survival is dependent on “primary habitat”, a mixture of wetlands and uplands. The uplands are critical because panther kittens need a dry den. They are helpless for months and are hidden in these thick dens by their mothers for protection from weather and predators.

There is a population of panthers within the boundaries of Everglades National Park. This habitat includes the sawgrass prairies of the “River of Grass” intermixed with Pinelands. Panthers do utilize the sawgrass prairies at least for travel. But Florida panthers occur across south Florida. At any given time, 5-11 panthers use the Florida Panther National Wildlife refuge for hunting, denning or travel. The refuge has a good mix of the needed habitat for panthers.

Do they swim and go in the water?

Yes, panthers use swamps and other wet habitats for hunting and travelling. They are good swimmers and are known to cross rivers. The male panthers that wander north of Lake Okeechobee must cross the Caloosahatchee River.

What are they prey species of the Florida Panther?

Panther prey is mainly white-tailed deer and feral hogs. Panthers do take a variety of other prey, including raccoons, armadillos and rabbits. A biologist, Roy McBride, documented that a male Florida panther killed an alligator in excess of six feet but this is rare.

Are the Florida Panther's Prey in danger and how does that effect the Florida Panther?

The densities of deer and hog are regulated and monitored as game animals. I am hopeful that the hunting of these animals will not depress their populations to the point of a resource conflict. I trust that the balance will be maintained and deer populations will remain healthy.

Are there any special characteristics you can tell me about the Florida Panther?

You have to be very lucky to observe a wild Florida panther. They are shy and elusive. We want to bring the experience of wild panthers to the public. There are several trip cameras on our refuge and we are planning more for a prey study. We have some videos of panthers on our website. We are planning to provide a better experience with the new cameras that have higher resolution. Viewers will get a

better understanding of the special characteristic of this magnificent animal by viewing wild panthers.

Are there any programs you are engaged in that you would like me to highlight in the article?

There is a new concept being planned to conserve the landscape of Florida. By landscape I mean not only the undisturbed areas, but traditional uses of the land such as ranches. These ideas, if applied, would benefit everyone including private land holders, sportsmen, and the general public. This concept will protect vast tracks of land from over-development instead of isolated pockets. This will not only protect the Florida panther but also people that need clean water, recreation and still allow ranchers to maintain their land and way of life.. This is a plan that if successful in execution can be applied in many areas of the country. The plan is the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Areas. Readers can learn more at our website.

Are you working with other organizations to help save the Florida Panther?

We work closely with a number of organizations that are concerned about the survival of Florida panthers. The board

members of the Friends include people that work for the Defenders of Wildlife and the Conservancy of Southwest Florida, so we are closely connected to their activities. The Naples Zoo is supportive of activities that ensure the survival of panthers and they hold a Florida panther day that draws a good crowd. Almost all of the activities we participate in include many of the groups for which part of their mission includes panther survival.

How can our readers help your organization save the Florida Panther?

We appreciate donations and volunteers. The donations help us with our educational programs and support for the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge. There are funds needed for the refuge that would not be available without the Friends. We also have an "Adopt a Panther" program, for which adoptees get an adoption certificate, photo, biography on their adopted wild cat, and other benefits depending on the level of adoption. Funding from this program helps us provide educational programs to raise awareness and support for the Florida panther. We would also like for people to voice their opinion on Florida panther issues and there are many threats and opportunity to stay abreast of.

What does the future look like for the Florida Panther?

I think we can maintain their population in south Florida in the short term unless a catastrophe occurs, such as disease. However the existing breeding range is not enough to support a population large enough to prevent genetic defects caused by inbreeding. This is a problem with endangered wild cats worldwide. Isolated pockets of these cats will not survive in the long run. Expansion into other areas of their historical range would insure survival. We concentrate on defending the breeding range in Florida to support the existing population which has many threats; otherwise there will never be an opportunity in the future. That being said we promote a landscape philosophy that will in the future expand their range.

Is there anything else you would like to tell me about the Florida Panther?

Florida panthers are a symbol and an intricate part of the wilderness. Every panther every day provides services that are not widely appreciated. Their large impact on the food web can't be replicated in any other way. The "wilderness" that we enjoy and is part of the American experience will not be the same if they vanish. Florida panthers have been a part of the human psyche since the first interaction between

these majestic cats and humans. They hold a certain elevated status with us. This symbolic role is important in the survival of numerous other threaten plants and animals. When we protect panthers we are protecting the entire natural environment.. This is important for our well-being and future generations.

What web page should I use to tell people to go to so they can help and send donations?

www.floridapanther.org