



Florida Panther *Update*

December 2011

Field Stories

A Florida Panther's Rite of Passage Back into the Wild

Story by Roxann Hanson, Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge (FPNWR) Volunteer

On the chilly morning of November 29, in a remote longleaf pine forest north of Jacksonville, Florida we silently waited in the pick-up cab, occasionally grabbing at an audacious mosquito attracted to our warm breath. The mood was solemn. Our thoughts were with an eighteen-month-old male panther facing an ordeal that day. Yet, if everything transpired as planned, it would be an ordeal with a very positive outcome: his release that evening near his birthplace, Burns Lake in Big Cypress National Preserve (BCNP). It was 9:15am and the second time White Oak Conservation Center Staff Veterinarian Dr. Scott Citino disappeared behind the nearby shelter carrying a dart rifle. Florida panther K304 was receiving a second dose of the drug blend medetomidine-midazolam-ketamine. This veterinary anesthesia was not taking full effect after the first darting. Having been trapped in the enclosure less than two days earlier, the adolescent male panther was highly agitated, pacing unhappily back and forth. Orphaned in the wild as a kitten, he was being raised at White Oak with minimal human contact, in a ten-acre enclosure during the past thirteen months. His frenetic behavior was expected, even welcomed; an indication of an untamed demeanor. But the resulting elevated adrenaline levels could cause receptor sites in his brain to be blocked from receiving the anesthesia. Eventually, after the second dose, he did become sedated and the White Oak team could mobilize into action.



In the holding pen, light testing with a rake handle confirmed K304 was sedated and now safe to transport. USFWS Photo

K304 was gently lifted onto a pick-up bed, carefully padded in with blankets and attended by three White Oak personnel. Minutes later he was settled on a table in a veterinary exam/surgery room and hooked up to a vital signs monitor after a quick weigh-in (86 pounds). Relaxed voices echoed in the sterile room punctuated by the soft reassuring beeps of the monitor. Comments uttered by White Oak veterinarians and technicians as they worked revealed K304's condition. "Beautiful irises." "No kink." "Slight heart murmur." "He's got the Roman nose." "There's the cowlick, a remnant sign of inbreeding." Ticks were tweezered off and stored for analysis. I counted twenty-five in



Karen Ziegler-Meeks of White Oak, K304's keeper for thirteen months, bids him farewell. Photo ©Ralph Arwood

the "tick garage". An application of Frontline insured that K304 would not carry any new pest species into Big Cypress National Preserve.

Allowed to touch his tail (which sported the characteristic black tip), I marveled at the soft fur and how lightweight it was. A blood pressure cuff was wrapped around the base. His reddish brown cowlick hairs were slightly coarse and tufted straight up. K304 was a magnificent, healthy male panther. Karen Ziegler-Meeks, his keeper, was visibly satisfied with his condition. She had been monitoring his progress in captivity primarily through trail cameras, rarely getting a close-up look at her charge.

As the White Oak veterinarian team worked through their check list, Deborah Jansen, BCNP panther biologist, concentrated on K304's collar. After removing the "old" collar, measurements were taken of his neck so she could size the new collar. There were many factors to consider including the fact that this boy panther was not quite finished growing at eighteen months. K304's collar is a breakaway design so if the signal fails, it will fall off of him before it gets too tight. After meticulous testing and adjustments, the collar was fitted to 41.5 centimeters inside circumference. At that point K304 was officially designated FP194. In a sense, the new collar was his rite of passage. He was now ready to leave White Oak for the wild.



After the final bolt is tightened on the tracking collar, K304 receives a new moniker: FP194. USFWS Photo

FP194 next became the responsibility of Dr. Mark Cunningham, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission Veterinarian. His job was to transport the big cat in a heavy wooden crate by vehicle to the release location in BCNP. A private aircraft was available but Dr. Cunningham preferred retaining the option to stop the vehicle quickly to attend to the panther if needed. FP194 would recover from anesthesia en route. One day's ration of fluids had been administered intravenously so the panther would not have to be given water during the trip. We all smiled as Dr. Cunningham lightheartedly complained about the prospect of breathing the odor of panther urine while on the road.

Once at the release site, the door of the crate was slowly opened at 7:13 PM by Big Cypress Biologist John Kellam. John had coordinated the cat's capture thirteen months earlier. FP194 looked out for over a minute from the crate, perhaps recalling the smells and sounds of his previous home. Then he splashed through the water and into the darkness.

It's been written that future generations will judge us on how hard we fought for the survival of known diminishing wildlife species. They would be pleased with the dedication exhibited by the many wildlife specialists and their supporters in the effort to save FP194 and release him back into the wild.

For background information on Florida Panther #194 see:
www.fws.gov/floridapanther/pdfs/pantherupdate/2011may.pdf
White Oak Conservation Center website: www.wocenter.org/

First Florida Panther Festival a Huge Success! *By Sandy Mickey, Park Ranger, Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge*



More than 1,000 people attended the first Florida Panther Festival October 29, 2011 at North Collier Regional Park in Naples. Activities at the festival included presentations

by Florida panther biologists, field trips into panther habitat, children's activities, livestock pen demonstration, live bluegrass music, and information from more than 35 conservation organizations.

"Our goal is to hold this free event every year for people to celebrate the Florida panther and increase their awareness of responsible actions for safe coexistence," said Ben Nottingham, refuge manager of Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge. "Attendees also learned about the issues facing panthers and about research conducted by various agencies that help them." The Florida Panther Festival was a collaborative effort by nine conservation organizations and agencies including the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, the National Park Service, and Friends of the Florida Panther Refuge. Efforts are underway to plan next year's festival, so stay tuned! Website: www.floridapantherfestival.com/

Notices and Links

Publications Covering the FP194 Release:

November 30, Big Cypress National Preserve, "**Release of Florida Panther K304/FP194**", by Bob DeGross
www.nps.gov/bicy/parknews/release-of-florida-panther.htm

November 30, Naples Daily News, "**Young Florida Panther Returned to the Wild**", by Kristine Gill
www.naplesnews.com/news/2011/nov/30/young-florida-panther-returned-to-the-wild/

December 1, South Florida Sun-Sentinel.com, "**Orphaned Florida Panther Released at Big Cypress**", by David Fleshler
articles.sun-sentinel.com/2011-12-01/news/sfl-orphaned-florida-panther-returned-to-wild-20111130_1_panther-kittens-adult-panthers-panther-population

Other Florida Panther Related Links:

November 16, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission posted their "**Annual Report on the Research and Management of Florida Panthers: 2010-2011.**" www.floridapanthernet.org/index.php/news/item/1936/

An article by Craig Pittman was published November 5 in the St. Petersburg Times entitled, "**Development Company Controls Key to Florida Panther Survival**". www.tampabay.com/news/environment/wildlife/development-company-controls-key-to-florida-panther-survival/1200117

November 6, Naples Daily News posted an article By Tracy X. Miguel "Recent Heavy Rainfall in Collier Bodes Well For Wood Stork Nesting Season" It provides information on **effects of recent heavy rainfall (end of October) on the Florida Panther.**
www.naplesnews.com/news/2011/nov/06/wood-stork-corkscrew-swamp-sanctuary-rain-panther/

Florida Panther Update Partnership This newsletter is made possible through the efforts of the following agencies:

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) www.floridapanthernet.org

Big Cypress National Preserve (BCNP) www.nps.gov/bicy

Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge (FPNWR) www.fws.gov/floridapanther



Past Update Issues: www.floridapanther.org/newsletter.html **Contact us:** floridapanther@fws.gov
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