

## Two Weeks in Everglades National Park

6-17 December 1999

The following summary of our first 2 weeks in Everglades National Park is provided by David Shindle. A daily synopsis of events by Mark Lotz follows the summary.

We began capture season 1999-2000 in Everglades National Park (ENP) on December 6. The priorities of this initial capture effort in ENP were to capture and replace radio collars on females TX 108 and #61<sub>F1</sub>. Both female's radio collars prematurely stopped transmitting this fall. In addition to these recollars, other priorities were to determine the presence (and radio collar if captured) of the 8-month old male kitten of #61<sub>F1</sub> and the 22-month old female offspring of TX 108.

Roy McBride (FWC houndsman) focused his daily efforts on Long Pine Key (LPK), which is the core area of panther use in ENP. Hunting conditions were close to ideal on LPK because the 2 cats with functioning radio collars (TX105 and #16) were away from LPK and therefore any fresh sign observed would be from a cat that needed to be captured and radio-collared.

Throughout the first week of surveys, we observed fresh female tracks from at least 2 different females on LPK. Therefore, it was a matter of time before Roy's dogs crossed paths with scent fresh enough to trail. On 14 December Roy treed a radio-collared female in Douglass Hammock (named for the Everglades proponent Marjorie Stoneman Douglass). After failing to detect TX 105's radio frequency emanating from the hammock, it was obvious that the treed cat was either TX 108 or #61<sub>F1</sub>. However, one look at the large female cat perched precariously in the large oak lead us to believe that it was TX108. Once the cat was safely immobilized, ear tattoos and a scan of her subcutaneous transponder identification chip confirmed that it was TX108. TX108 appeared in good health and after replacing her radio collar and taking the necessary biomedical samples and measurements, she was left to safely recover.

The remainder of the second week in ENP was spent attempting to capture the other female panther whose sign we observed on the eastern side of LPK. Although we continued to observe her sign, we were hampered by morning rains that diminished any scent left the night before and therefore decreased the likelihood that the dogs would be able to trail the panther successfully.

### Daily Events

6 December 1999

Sooner or later all of the panthers in Everglades National Park (ENP) pass through Long Pine Key (LPK), a 30,000 acre "island" of pine trees and tropical hardwood hammocks practically in the middle of the Park; a fact we hoped to use to our advantage. Most of the Park is comprised of vast areas of sawgrass, pickeral weed ponds, and deep water sloughs interspersed with small tree islands. Mangroves exist in the transition from everglades vegetation to Florida Bay. During the dry season, panthers will utilize many of these habitats, but only Long Pine Key provides year-round habitat.

Our daily routine started around 6:00 am, just before daylight. We would split up and search for the panthers with working radio collars so we would know where *not* to hunt. We were not after those individuals (TX 105 and #16) but rather the panthers whose collars had quit (TX108 and #61<sub>F1</sub>).

The dogs were then released to hunt where they were the least likely to encounter a collared panther. Five dogs were on this trip; Clack, Coco, Rosie, Ruby, and Tuffy. They travel the trails with Roy as their noses scan the air and foliage discovering things that we can only imagine. With any luck they will pick up the scent of a panther and we'll be in business. The rest of the crew was strategically positioned along the main Park highway just in case any chase got close to it where we could either stop the dogs or slow down any traffic.

The dogs tails began to wag as fresh sign was discovered. With noses to the ground, they darted off the trail and the chase was on. Within a few minutes barking was heard as they got closer to their quarry. However, we did not unload the capture gear this day because they chased a bobcat. Little did we know that this is a scene that would repeat itself for the following 4 days. We could tell it was a bobcat from the start. Roy's first clue was how the dogs were reacting. Bobcats, being smaller than panthers, only brush by vegetation up to a certain height. When the dogs sniff low on the vegetation rather than higher up that usually means bobcat. From our position on the highway we could hear the chase in progress. Panthers usually do not run far or long before they dart up a tree to rid themselves of the pursuing dogs. Bobcats, however, tend to give the dogs a run for their money. They are more likely to jump from a tree and start the process all over again. The chase we heard, although not more than a few minutes, was longer than a panther chase. We monitored the situation from the road as Roy retrieved the dogs from the woods.

7 December 1999

Day 2. We gathered along the park highway dark and early (before sunrise). The dogs began trailing a bobcat in a glade south-east of LPK. A gator was heard bellowing nearby. An incredible natural wonder to experience but not one that most hounds-men enjoy hearing when the dogs are out. Yes, we have lost dogs to alligators before. The chase got close to an old road where we hoped to head off the dogs and catch them up. However, the bobcat managed to make it across that road and the dogs were in hot pursuit. David saw the bobcat run across. It finally climbed a small tree in an area with saltbush that grew together as thick as the grass in a lawn. We had to chop our way in and lead the dogs out.

I made an interesting discovery as I walked the trails looking for panther sign that morning; a pile of sharp-shinned hawk feathers. It's unusual to find dead hawks, but what made this discovery even more interesting is that there was a band on the leg. Sonny Bass, the Park biologist, will send the band off and maybe we can find out where this hawk was banded.



8 December 1999

Day 3 - bobcats 3, panthers 0.

9 December 1999

Again with the bobcats. Many people ask if the dogs can be trained to trail only panthers. The answer to that is yes. However, Roy catches cats worldwide. Besides catching panthers and bobcats for us, he's caught jaguars, ocelots, African leopards, snow leopards, lynx, and several other cat species. So his dogs are trained on "all cats." It's only a minor inconvenience and has never prevented the capture of panthers. In fact, it keeps the dogs well trained because if they only chased Florida panthers, they would not be very busy.

After we were done hunting for the day, David and I went to check on some remote sensing cameras that he had placed out. When we reached one camera we noticed what appeared to be bullet holes through the case. However, upon closer inspection we discovered what actually caused the breach of the case. A black bear apparently got curious and decided to see if that strange "berry" hanging on the side of the tree was edible. It bit through the case partially damaging the infrared sensing portion of the system. The camera escaped unscathed but unfortunately the film was at the end of the roll. So we didn't get the picture of bear fangs that we were hoping for. Bears aren't very common in ENP. We saw sign of one last year and one this year.

10 December 1999

No bobcats today. But more dead hawks have been discovered. They all appear to be sharp-shinned hawks. I've found 2, Roy has found 2, and David has found 1. They've just been piles of feathers so there is nothing left to perform a necropsy on to determine cause of death. It's strange to find so many dead hawks in one area and all seem to have died approximately around the same time. At this point no one really knows for sure what is causing these deaths.

11 December 1999

This was a rather uneventful day hampered by rain. No panthers. No bobcats. No fresh sign encountered.

12 December 1999

Another bobcat was treed today. That makes 5 so far.

13 December 1999

There is an area on the south side of LPK known as the “hole in the donut.” It is an area of Brazilian pepper, a nasty exotic shrub capable of reaching tree-like proportions, that has taken over old farm fields. It’s called the “hole in the donut” because it has very little wildlife value and is surrounded by native vegetation. It grows very dense blocking out all other vegetation. Since Hurricane Andrew in 1992, this area has become virtually impenetrable. The hurricane blew the pepper down laying all the stems and branches horizontal. New growth has since grown up vertically. The stuff is difficult to walk through to say the least. Imagine taking a 100 foot length of 10 foot high chain link fence. Now ball it up and try walking through the middle of it. That just about describes how difficult it is to maneuver through the “hole in the donut.” The panthers use this area, however, as resting and denning cover from time to time.

The dogs began trailing a panther in the pines through #61<sub>F1</sub>'s known home range. However, the chase was very quickly heading to the Brazilian pepper on the south side of Research Road. A capture in the pepper could be unsafe for the panther so it is a situation we try to avoid. Roy managed to stop the dogs just 20 feet from the pepper edge. It’s a little frustrating to let a panther go when you’ve spent days trying to cut it’s trail. But when it comes to the panthers safety there’s no other choice to be made and no second guessing. We believed this panther to be #61<sub>F1</sub> because it was in her old home range.

14 December 1999

Today started out like all the other days. I was at the western end of LPK near Pine Glades Lake. I could hear TX 105 with the receiver to the south-west. As I was walking down the trail looking for panther tracks, I heard a dog bark. Then another and another. The chase was on. I knew one way or the other I’d have to get into action so I started heading back to my truck. On my way back, Roy radioed to see where I was. I knew since he radioed so quickly after the dogs took off that



they weren't after a bobcat. My hope, and everybody's for that matter, was that they weren't after TX 105. The dogs were heading in the approximate direction of TX 105. The dogs had treed a panther in a hardwood hammock and we listened for TX 105's signal. Good news! It was not coming from the hammock with the dogs. This was TX 108. She was treed in an oak about 17 feet high. We caught her in the net as she fell after being darted. Everything went like clock work and TX 108 had a brand new collar again.

15 December 1999

Due to prior commitments of some of our crew, we were unable to hunt today. However, David and I scoured the trails on LPK with our ATV's looking for fresh panther sign. We found some tracks but nothing significant. The most interesting thing I found was a 3 foot long diamond-backed rattlesnake stretched out across the trail. Being a lover of all that is "cold-blooded" I watched as he slowly made his way across the trail into the rocky pinelands. After that little moment of Zen, I resumed my search for panther sign.

16 December 1999

The days hunt failed to turn up any fresh panther sign. But I did see something that I had never seen before. A giant land crab. They are typically located around the mangroves. However, this one I saw was crossing research road... several miles from the shore line. The large pincer easily encompassed my leather hiking boot and pinched with enough force to be felt. Although it did not hurt my protected foot, I certainly wouldn't want to get a finger caught in that pincer.



17 December 1999

Rain once again hampered the hunt today. Despite the drizzly night, the dogs managed to start a couple of bobcats, but Roy was able to head them off before they got too far. After the day's hunt we headed back to Naples for a much needed rest.

We never caught up to #61<sub>F1</sub>. Being an F1 and therefore a high priority, we will be back again to resume our efforts to catch her. She can run, but she can't hide. Patience and perseverance will hopefully pay off for us.