

Panther #71_{F1} Gives Birth to F2's



Kittens in den

In late June, Panther #71_{F1} gave birth to 4 kittens (2 males, 2 females) in Big Cypress National Preserve. This is the second documented litter of F2's born into the panther population. Panther #71_{F1} is an F1 offspring (born in May 1997) of Texas cougar 107 and is the sister of #70_{F1} who also recently gave birth to 3 kittens (see "Field Notes" report *Panther #70_{F1} Gives Birth to F2's*).

Approximately three months earlier, #71_{F1} was located with male panther #79_{F1} (born 9/95 to TX 101). In late June, #71_{F1} began to exhibit the typical behavior of a female panther who had given birth. A pregnant female at the end of her gestation period will begin to restrict her movements to a very small area as she searches for and establishes a den for her newborn kittens (see the Mating and Reproduction in the Panther Handbook.) On 2 July we visited the site, previously seen only from the air, in order to accurately pinpoint the location of #71_{F1} and to set



F2 Kitten

up our "Biologist in a Box." The "Biologist in a Box" allows us to remotely monitor (with the use of a cellular phone and standard radio telemetry equipment) a radiocollared panther at her den site and determine when she leaves the den. It is only during the female's absence that we will attempt to document the presence of kittens. The following are the events that unfolded over the Independence Day weekend:

Friday, July 2: We successfully set up the Box and began to monitor #71_{F1}'s presence at the den around 2:00 p.m. Calls to the den indicated that #71_{F1} began to leave the den around 9:30 p.m. However, because it would be impractical to search for the kittens at night, we could only hope that her search for food would take her far enough away from the den that she would still be absent the following morning.

Saturday, July 3: A call to the den at 4:00 a.m. found that #71_{F1} had already returned from her late night excursion. She remained at the den throughout the day until about 7:30 p.m. when the strength of her radio signal indicated that she was beginning her second foray away from the den in less than 24 hours. Although it was still daylight, we did not have enough time to reach the den before nightfall. If she had made a successful kill of a deer or hog the previous night and returned to the den in less than 7 hours, would she only need to repeat this short trek to continue to feed off the carcass? Or, did she make a small meal of a raccoon or rabbit and would hunt again tonight, possibly delaying her return to the den until the following day?

Sunday, July 4: A call to the den at 4:00 a.m. was met with welcome silence. #71_{F1} was still away from the den and now the race was on to reach the den before she returned. At 6:30 a.m. we made the 30-minute trek through a cypress swamp to reach the den site that was hidden somewhere on a small elevated island of slash pine and saw palmetto. Shortly after we began our search for the kittens we found two areas in a palmetto thicket where it was obvious that #71_{F1} had rested. We even found traces of panther hair amid the flattened vegetation of this area. However, after an extensive search of this area, no sign of the kittens was found. Our focus then turned to the other area and it wasn't long before we observed the 4 spotted kittens perfectly camouflaged amid the ground litter of the dense palmetto thicket. The kittens ranged in weight from 1.9 to 2.9 pounds and were approximately 14-17 days old. Biological samples were collected and the kittens were implanted with transponders just under the skin for future identification. Time will only tell how many, if any, of this litter will survive to be recruited as adults into the panther population.