

Orphaned Florida Panther Kittens Returned To Wild

Three Florida panther kittens, from two different litters, were returned to the wild on Wednesday evening August 20th. Their mothers both suffered similar fates, being killed by separate male panthers in an act known as *intraspecific aggression*. Although males more commonly kill other rival males, it is not uncommon for females to succumb to an aggressive encounter. Typically this is the result of defending their young, a likely scenario in both of these cases. Male Florida panthers have been documented killing 10 females compared to 23 males.

The first two kittens captured and removed to captivity were female Florida Panther (FP) 113 and male FP114. Their mother, FP78, was killed by an uncollared male on the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge (FPNWR) in Collier County on October 18, 2002. Her radio-collar was detected in the mortality mode during a routine telemetry monitoring flight, which occurs every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday throughout the year. These kittens were born in April and chances for survival at only 6-months-old were fairly slim. Upon investigating the area where FP78 lay, a consumed deer carcass was also found. Defending her family's food may have contributed to FP78's death. Taking advantage of a cache site the kittens were familiar with, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) panther biologist David Shindle, placed additional deer meat at the site in order to keep the kittens in the area, maintain their food intake, and document number of survivors from the original litter of four. Several infrared-triggered cameras were placed at the deer cache, where FP78 was found, and on nearby trails. Photographic evidence indicated the presence of two kittens and they were captured on October 23, 2002. FP113 weighed 25 pounds and FP114 weighed 27 pounds.



- **FP113 FP114 @ FP78 mortality site** – The two remaining offspring of FP78 are documented visiting her mortality site. This photo confirmed the existence of 2 kittens.



- **FP113 exam** – FP113, at 6 months and 25 pounds, was brought out to a nearby trail for her customary capture exam.

The third kitten captured and removed to captivity was female FP116. Her mother, FP67, was killed by male FP65 on a private ranch in Hendry County on January 15, 2003. Like FP78, FP67's radio-collar was detected in mortality during a routine telemetry flight. When biologists arrived, FP65 was still on the scene. Because no food cache was found, FP67's carcass was left on site to maintain a rendezvous site for any kittens. The internal organs were removed for standard biomedical testing. This, along with the cold January temperatures (lows in the upper 30's), helped preserve FP67 aiding our efforts to keep any surviving kittens nearby. Deer meat was placed close by in the hopes that if the kittens returned to mom, they would also encounter the food. Again, several cameras were deployed at key locations in order to determine the number of surviving kittens. Photos verified the existence of one kitten and FP116 was captured on January 20, 2003. Born in June 2002, she was now 7 months old. As with the other kittens, chances for survival at this age were slim.



- **FP116 & FP67 18 January 2003 D Shindle FWC** – An emotional sight, FP116 visits her non-responsive mother.

All three kittens were taken to White Oak Conservation Center in Yulee, Florida (north of Jacksonville) upon their capture. They were given live prey in a 5-10 acre pen in order to hone their predatory skills. Once proficient at capturing deer, their preferred prey, they were ready for release. White Oak has assisted the FWC in caring for orphaned, sick, and injured panthers in the past. They are well equipped with the right facilities and dedicated staff. It's no easy task to raise a young panther so that it can be successfully returned to the wild. But White Oak has done a wonderful job in the past. Some of their successes include FP 23, FP69, FP65, and FP104.



- **FP113 at WO** – All the kittens grew well while at White Oak Conservation Center.

The kittens were released within their mothers' former territory. The brother and sister, FPs 113 and 114, were first placed in a 10 ft. by 40 ft. "soft release pen" erected on the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge (FPNWR). After a brief period the door was opened and they left on their own accord shortly after sunset. FP116 was released directly from the transport crate and made a hasty beeline into a nearby hardwood hammock. The releases were successful although somewhat anticlimactic as one only catches a quick glimpse before they disappear into the dense south Florida vegetation. The females have an excellent chance at long-term survival but the male will still face the same challenges posed to all young male panthers.



- **FP113 3 agency move** – FP113 and FP114 were temporarily placed in a “soft release pen” before opening the doors in the hopes they would exit and remain together.



- **FP113 exits pen** – Free at last! FP113 is photographed leaving the release pen.

Acknowledgements: Multiple agencies and many individuals were involved in making these releases a success. The entire FWC panther capture team deserves accolades for the long hours and ground work that went into determining the number of kittens remaining in each litter and subsequently capturing them. The mammal keepers and veterinary staff at White Oak performed the most vital aspect by raising these 6-7 month old kittens so they could once again take their rightful place as an apex predator in a balanced ecosystem. Thousands of 4th graders in southwest Florida in the Panther Posse Program donated their spare change to Pennies For Panthers administered through the Wings of Hope Program at Florida Gulf Coast University in order to purchase remotely triggered cameras to place in the conditioning pens so that White Oak staff could monitor the status of the kittens while limiting human contact. Lastly, much appreciation is extended to the managers, staff and cooperating landowners where the releases took place on the FPNWR and the Big Cypress Mitigation Bank.

How You Can Help

Buy a Florida panther license plate. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's (FWC) panther research is funded 100% through your purchase of Florida panther license plates. Plates are only \$25 more than a regular tag and can be purchased at your local tax collectors office.

Make a donation to the new Florida Panther Fund established through The Wildlife Foundation of Florida (WFF). This fund was established to aid in the recovery of injured or orphaned Florida panthers as well as other panther conservation needs. The Florida Panther Fund is an important resource that will give the FWC flexibility to deal with these rare, unplanned and non-budgeted events. You can visit their website at www.wildlifefoundationofflorida.com. Anyone can donate to this fund. Checks should be made payable to Wildlife Foundation of Florida and mailed to Post Office Box 11010, Tallahassee, FL 32302. Checks should be earmarked "Florida Panther Fund." The WFF is a not-for-profit organization [IRS 501(c)(3)], and is a State of Florida Tax Exempt organization.

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