

Florida Panther Field Note
Capture Season Update
January – February 2002

Four new panthers were added to the study population, all of which received Global Positioning System (GPS) collars for a feasibility study. One panther was recollared. Three radio-collared panthers died, two as a result of intraspecific aggression and one from undetermined causes. Another noteworthy event was the release of FP65_{F1} after recovering from a broken leg sustained during a routine capture last season.

We are evaluating the performance of GPS radio-collars in comparison to the VHF radio-collars currently used. Two different brands are being tested. One is designed to upload data into a laptop computer that we carry with us in the plane. The other style stores the data on board until we physically retrieve the collar and download the information. Four units were deployed this season, two of each type, on male and female panthers. The GPS collars also have the traditional VHF transmitters and we'll continue to locate the panthers with GPS collars three times per week the same as we do with the others. Florida panthers 109 and 110 had the "uploadable" style attached while panthers 111 and 112 have the type that stores data until retrieved.

Friday January 4, 2002

FP49 Dead - Female FP49 was discovered dead on the "Addition Lands" of Big Cypress National Preserve (BCNP) during the flight this day. She was 12 years old. Upon walking in to retrieve the body a panther was glimpsed leaving her carcass. Our first thought was that it was her 5-month-old kitten. This panther also had fed upon FP49's body. Thinking we had an orphaned kitten to deal with, we called in the dogs. However, this mystery panther turned out to be an uncollared adult male. He was not radio-collared because he did not fit any criteria of our capture goals. Given the evidence that FP49 had been killed by this adult male, the lack of any kitten sign in the area (including FP49 being spotted alone during a telemetry flight), and FP49's unsuccessful history of raising kittens to dispersal age, we concluded that she was no longer raising a kitten. Although we have documented female mortality as a result of intraspecific aggression before, this is the first documented case of cannibalism by an adult male on an adult female in the Florida panther population. However, it has been documented in other cougar populations.

Wednesday January 16, 2002

FP105 Dead - Another mortality signal emitting from a radio-collar indicated that female FP105 was dead on the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge (FPNWR). She was recovered in an area of standing water. There were no observable clues at the scene that could help us determine a cause of death. Unfortunately, the necropsy was unable to provide any answers either. Further tests have been scheduled on tissue samples collected at the necropsy in hopes of determining a cause of death.

Friday January 18, 2002

FP96 Dead - FP96's radio-collar was beating in the mortality mode from private land adjacent to some agricultural fields between CR846 and Lake Trafford. The tell tale signs of intraspecific aggression left no doubt as to the cause of his demise. An uncollared panther was the culprit. FP96 was the first panther we recollared this season (11/1/01). He had recently begun dispersing north from his natal range on the FPNWR and traveled through the Camp Keais Strand corridor. He was 1 year-9 months old at the time of his death.

Thursday January 24, 2002

FP65_{F1} Released - FP65_{F1} sustained a broken leg during a routine recollar event in November 2001. The severity of the break and persistent infection warranted a prolonged stay in captivity. After approximately 15 months in captivity and enduring daily handling for treatment at times, FP65_{F1} was released back into his home range on 24 January 2002. Since his return he has been making normal movements and patrolling his old home range as if he were never gone.

Sunday February 10, 2002

FP109 Captured - The first GPS collar deployed was placed on male FP109 on Okaloacoochee Slough State Forest (OSSF). With new technology, our first time using this system, and the inevitability of Murphy's Law, we had to recapture FP109 a second time 10 days later to correct a problem with the collar. But since then things have gone well. FP109 had a very unique characteristic; a stub tail that only measured 8 inches. This was presumably an old injury. Considering his advanced age, estimated around 10 years, it's obviously had no adverse affects on him. He was also quite large weighing in at 148 pounds.



FP109 receives a dose of propofol (a short acting anesthetic) in order to continue his exam. FP109's "bobbed" tail hasn't slowed him down.

Wednesday February 13, 2002

FP110 Captured – The second GPS collar deployed was on female FP110, also captured on OSSF. The transponder revealed that she was from FP82's last litter and was now 14 months old. She hung up fairly low in an oak tree and was dropped safely into the net.



The GPS receiver antenna (hump) can clearly be seen on the top portion of the collar. Underneath is the GPS circuitry, VHF unit (connected to the whip antenna) and battery.

Thursday February 14, 2002

FP111 Captured – Unlike the uneventful capture of FP110 the day before (that's actually how we prefer it), male FP111's capture was a bit more exhilarating. We were already done hunting for the day when we learned that a Division of Forestry employee saw a panther cross the highway on his way in to work that morning. He showed us where he saw it and we set the dogs out. They immediately picked up the scent and began trailing it. The panther had gone through a recent prescribed burn making it difficult for the dogs to follow. However, once out of the burn, they quickly gained on the panther. A short while later we had a panther treed. He jumped shortly after he was darted. Because the drugs hadn't had time to take effect yet he was able to cover quite a bit of ground before re-treeing. Only two of us managed to arrive in time to break his fall. The rest of the crew was busy untangling themselves and the gear from a monstrous palmetto patch intertwined with vines. Once the panther was on the ground things soon returned to their normal (calm) manner. FP111 was the third panther caught on OSSF this week and also the third to have a GPS collar placed around his neck. Like FP109, FP111 was an older cat estimated to be 8 to 10 years old. He weighed 128 pounds.

Monday February 25, 2002

FP112 captured – We decided to deploy the last GPS collar on a female someplace other than OSSF. We moved our operation to the Bear Island Unit of BCNP where we knew our chances of catching a female were good. We found some fresh female tracks along a trail and radioed Roy to bring the dogs and see what they thought of them. The dogs were hot on the trail and it sounded like they were involved with more than one panther. Once the dogs barked "treed" Roy went in check out the situation. From our vantage point, still out on the trail, we could see a large panther way up in a pine tree. We drove up to Roy's buggy once we got the signal to come on in with the gear. However, after we turned the buggy engine off, we noticed that the dogs were not barking near the tree that we saw the panther in. The dogs were at bay with another panther, a female. Since capturing a female was dictated by our study protocol, we proceeded with capturing her. We could tell that the other panther was an adult male and, not meeting any study objectives, let him go. The crash bag fulfilled its function to cushion FP112 as she fell out before a rope could be tied around her. The last GPS collar was put on FP112. She was estimated to be about 3.5 years old and weighed 84 pounds.



A typical capture scene: part of the crew collects biomedical data and attaches the radio collar while the others pack up the gear to facilitate a quiet retreat as the panther wakes from anesthesia.

Thursday February 28, 2002

FP93_{B-TX} Recollared – This female's collar was changed in the Turner River Unit of BCNP. The dogs (only two are used for recollar situations) were led in to FP93_{B-TX}. Soon after the chase began an uncollared male panther ran by Roy. FP93_{B-TX} jumped twice before being darted in the third tree. She was then lowered to the ground by rope. She was 3 years old and weighed 90 pounds. Her blood progesterone levels indicated that she was pregnant.

Update on FP104

FP104 seems to be doing well since his release back on November 28, 2001. Recently he has been making dispersal type movements common to young male panthers. It's good to see that he has made it this far considering all the time and effort put forth to return him to the wild.