

Florida Panther Capture Activities

March 13-19, 2000

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The first three days of this week were spent scouting for sign of TX107 and her family. We scouted deep in the heart of Big Cypress National Preserve where TX107 was known to spend much of her time. Due to the remoteness of her home range we maximized our hunting hours by camping out in the woods. This allowed us to scout an extra four to six hours each day. We stayed out for three days and two nights. We split up into three groups and spread out across the trails. I don't know how many miles of trails we covered, but it was a lot! Unfortunately, we didn't discover any sign of TX107 or her kittens. After thoroughly covering this area it was clear that TX107 was elsewhere and we needed to rethink our strategy.

In the meantime, #88_{F2} (#70_{F1}'s collared kitten) had moved to a location where an attempt at capturing #70_{F1} (to replace the non-functioning collar) or another one of her kittens was feasible. So after taking a much-needed shower Wednesday night we got up bright and early the next morning and investigated the scene near #88_{F2}. Chances were that the whole family was together, but we only saw one set of tracks crossing a trail to where #88_{F2} was resting. Since we couldn't verify that the family was together we decided to wait for a better opportunity. We returned the next morning and found that the kittens had played in the trail during the night. Several tracks in the sand illustrated the kittens chasing each other and romping about. This was the clue we were hoping for. We now knew the family was together.

The dogs were led in to the radio signal and quickly treed an uncollared kitten. For a moment a couple of dogs were chasing another panther from the group but shortly joined the others at the tree. Soon after the kitten was darted it jumped out of the small tree it was in and climbed high up a nearby cypress tree. A second dart was required and the young panther went under while in the tree. I climbed up and lowered her to the ground. This new panther was dubbed #91_{F2}. Unfortunately, the second dart penetrated the kneecap of the back leg. We were unable to remove it in the field and the decision was made to take #91_{F2} to Lowry Park Zoo in Tampa, where specialists unsuccessfully attempted to remedy the situation. Fortunately, x-rays revealed that there was no damage to the patella. The needle-entered parallel (i.e. did not strike it straight on) therefore the bone did not fracture. In essence, the remaining portion of the needle was negligible and analogous to "pinning" a bone for repairs. Number 91_{F2} was driven back that night but she would have to wait until morning to be reunited with her family.

We were all hoping to find the family group where the capture occurred the previous day. Releasing #91_{F2} here would have been the easiest way to reunite the family members. However, we knew this was unlikely because we found a deer carcass that was completely consumed. Having finished their meal the group would be ready to move on. A quick check proved our suspicion, which set in motion a carefully crafted plan. Deb Jansen flew to locate the family. By this time they had traveled about two miles to the west and

were still moving. While the rest of us drove our buggies to the vicinity of the family, Deb loaded the crated #91_{F2} into the helicopter. The plan was to fly #91_{F2} by helicopter to the landing site nearest her family and rendezvous with the buggies. She would then be loaded on the buggies and be driven even closer. By this time the family group had settled down in a cypress dome to rest for the day. We were able to drive the buggies up to the dome. We walked the crate in a little ways and with the crate facing her family, opened the door. So far the plan was working beautifully. Apparently #91_{F2} didn't get a copy of our game plan. Once she came out, she did an about-face and ran to another cypress dome. Fortunately, it was very close by and chances were good that they would find each other. The only thing for us to do at that point was to leave the area and let things settle down.

The flight the next morning provided excellent news. Number 91_{F2} and her collared sibling #88_{F2} were together indicating the family had successfully reunited. Several days later, during a routine flight, Deb spotted the whole family group traveling together. Nothing unusual was noted about #91_{F2} with regard to her gait. It appears that despite #91_{F2}'s harrowing experience, she weathered it well and is no worse for wear.