

Florida Panther Capture Activities

March 20-31, 2000

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The bulk of our effort during the last two weeks of March was focused on locating sign of TX107 (and her year-old kittens) whose radio-collar failed in October 1999. Early days were the rule as we headed out on the buggies before sunrise in order to get to portions of TX107's range at daybreak. Some places in Big Cypress are a two-hour drive from Naples. Add to that another hour buggy ride to reach TX107's territory and some days those of us (David and I) who live in Naples had to leave our houses at 3:30 a.m.! I can't wait for daylight savings time to begin.

We essentially covered the entire Big Cypress National Preserve between I-75 and US 41 trying to locate this family group. Not surprisingly, we turned up evidence of other panthers in the area. On separate occasions, and in separate areas, we discovered tracks of a lone female panther. This could be the same animal or two different ones. The tracks were never fresh enough for the dogs to trail. David also found sign of a family group, but judging by the size of the tracks it was unlikely to be TX107 and her kittens. Aiding us immensely this year were the dry conditions in the preserve. The tracking conditions on the trails were ideal for seeing sign. It was also a lot easier on our swamp buggies; we didn't get stuck (as often).



Alligators were a common sight as they traveled far and wide looking for water in the drying landscape.

Our efforts finally paid off as we discovered sign of a family group that was likely TX107's. One of the dogs, Tuffy, trailed them slowly to the west a long way. The scent was relatively old and as the day wore on the dissipating scent was harder for her to follow. Tuffy finally came out to a large prairie and was unable to continue trailing the cats. The scent dissipates very quickly in the open sunshine and breezy expanse of a Big Cypress prairie. But this is the closest we had been so far, giving us cause for hope. We were closing in on them. The next question we had to ask ourselves was which way in this 729,000-acre preserve did they turn. We didn't cross their sign again until three days later. They had turned (back east), but by now we were a day or two behind them. Panther

hunting is like a good mystery novel. You can't wait to pick it up the next day to see what clues are uncovered and what twist of fate will occur next. The excitement of unraveling the mystery makes you greet each day with anticipation.

The last day of the month ended with the retrieval of TX101's carcass from the Big Cypress Seminole Indian Reservation. The mortality signal was detected during a routine telemetry flight. She had just been re-collared on 10 January and at that time was in good health. She was taken to the University of Florida vet school in Gainesville for necropsy but unfortunately was decomposed beyond the point where any determination of death could be made.