

## Christmas Eve Kittens

December 1999

Panther #66<sub>F1</sub> denned in mid December 1999, 3 months after she was located with male panther #60. Number 66<sub>F1</sub> picked a rather unusual place to establish her den: a 3 acre "island" of mixed cypress, pine and cabbage palm surrounded by tomato fields in Collier County near the intersection of CR 858 and SR 29. This den site is another example of the compatibility of human activity in areas occupied by panthers. We have had female panthers den successfully next to other agricultural fields, active oil wells, and well-used swamp buggy trails. The key feature that allows humans and panthers to co-exist appears to be the retention of panther habitat in large enough blocks to supply adequate cover and prey.

For 5 days after we set up the "biologist-in-a-box", #66<sub>F1</sub> would only leave her litter after sunset and return prior to sunrise. However, on Christmas Eve Day, #66<sub>F1</sub> delayed her return in the morning and that allowed us the opportunity to search for her den. After 5 minutes of searching, we found #66<sub>F1</sub>'s kittens, one male and 2 females. All were in good condition and each weighed 2 pounds, 4 ounces. The standard genetic samples were taken and transponders inserted. They were placed back in the den after our quick examination where they quickly huddled together for warmth just like we found them.

You may recall that #66<sub>F1</sub> had a litter of 3 (2 males, 1 female) in October 1998. Her movements seemed to indicate that she raised those kittens up to about 3 months of age. Our search for kitten sign and #66<sub>F1</sub>'s movement patterns after that date did not yield any positive indication of kittens present and we assumed that this litter was lost.

