

## Florida Panther

*(Puma concolor coryi)*

The **Florida Panther** is listed as an **Endangered** species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC). The Florida panther was listed due to its small population size and limited geographic distribution caused by the loss, degradation and fragmentation of habitat primarily from urbanization and agricultural development. **It is illegal to harass, harm, capture or kill this animal.**



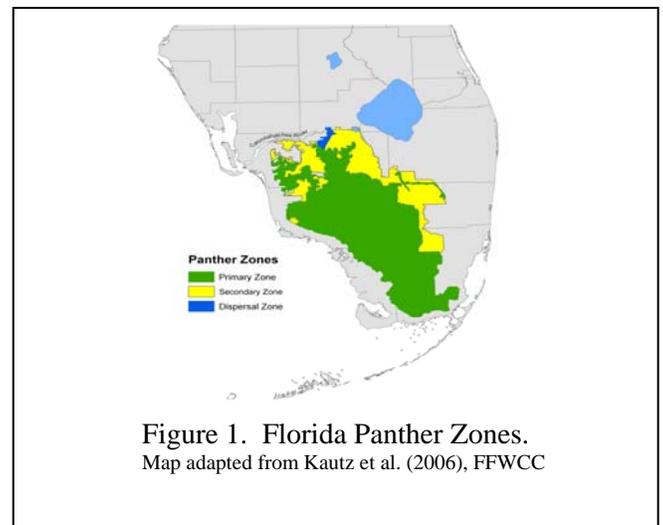
- Kittens are gray with dark brown or blackish spots and five bands around the tail. The spots fade as the kittens grow older and are almost unnoticeable by the time they are six months old. At this age, their bright blue eyes slowly turn to the light-brown straw color of the adult.
- Distinguished from other subspecies of panther by having a hair whorl or cowlick in the middle of their back, a right-angle crook in their tail and light or white flecking on their neck and shoulders. Also, compared to other subspecies they have a relatively more slender tail, longer legs and smaller feet.

## Range

The Florida panther once ranged throughout most of the southeastern United States from Arkansas and Louisiana eastward across Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Georgia and into parts of Tennessee and South Carolina. Today, the only known remaining wild population, estimated to be between 80-100 individuals (not counting kittens), is located in the Big Cypress Swamp/Everglades region of south Florida. The primary breeding population is centered in Collier, Hendry, Lee, Monroe and Miami-Dade counties. Other counties where Florida panthers have been documented (radio-collared males & uncollared males killed by vehicles) include Broward, DeSoto, Highlands, Glades, Osceola, Palm Beach and Polk. No female panther or kittens have been documented north of the Caloosahatchee River since 1973.

## Description

- Adults are unspotted and typically rusty reddish-brown on the back, tawny on the sides and pale gray underneath. There has never been a melanistic (black) *Puma* documented in North America.
- Adult males can reach a length of seven feet from their nose to the tip of their tail and may exceed 160 lbs in weight. However, males typically average 115 lbs and stand approximately 24-28 inches high at the shoulder. Female panthers are smaller with an average weight of 75 lbs and length of 6 ft.



# Habitat

Florida panthers and their primary prey (white-tailed deer and feral hog) use and are supported by a mosaic of upland and wetland habitats including pine flatwoods, hardwood hammocks, cypress swamps, wet prairies, freshwater marshes and a variety of agricultural lands. Panthers use these habitats for resting and denning sites, hunting grounds and travel routes. Radio telemetry monitoring of Florida panthers indicate that native, upland forest communities, particularly hardwood hammocks and pine flatwoods, are optimal cover types. However, panthers will utilize non-forested cover types such as wetlands when interspersed within forest dominated landscapes. Agricultural and other disturbed habitats, freshwater marsh, thicket swamp and mixed swamp are frequented by panthers but to a lesser degree than native, upland forested communities.

Cover for panther resting and denning sites is typically comprised of dense, almost impenetrable vegetation close to the ground. Saw palmetto is the most important understory vegetation; however, wax myrtle shrub thickets, fern beds, sawgrass, oak scrub and exotic vegetation (primarily Brazilian pepper) may be used.

Panther reproduction in Florida occurs in relatively intact landscapes that are large enough to support individuals with extensive overlapping home ranges. A prerequisite for successful reproduction in south Florida seems to involve large, mutually exclusive home ranges that contain a single male panther and several adult females with their dependant offspring.

# Management and Protection

Florida panther survival and recovery are theorized to be dependent upon three focal areas: 1) protection and enhancement of the remaining population and its associated habitats and prey resources, 2) improving genetic health and population viability, and 3) re-establishing at least two additional populations within the panther's historic range.

Farmers and landowners can be directly involved in the protection of this species by following these precautions and recommendations:

- Preserve optimal panther habitats (pine flatwoods and hardwood hammocks).
- Utilize prescribed fire to maintain a proper/historical burn regime on native fire-adapted communities.
- Use chemical, biological and/or mechanical means to help control invasive, exotic vegetation in order to maintain and perpetuate healthy habitats for panthers and their prey.
- Do not overgraze. Practice rotational grazing to reduce grazing pressure, especially in native communities and particularly in hardwood hammocks.
- Re-establish, either through natural re-generation or planting, pine flatwood and hardwood hammock communities. Planting of oaks and palms on disturbed sites can significantly increase mast production, directly benefiting panther prey.
- Regulate harvest of panther prey species. Consider reducing harvest of deer and/or implementing a deer management program utilizing a minimum antler height or a minimum number of points.

NRCS works with the USFWS and FWC to ensure that Federal and State-listed species will not be adversely affected by actions recommended in the landowner's conservation plan. Please remember that the Florida panther is a protected species and, as a minimum, the USFWS and the FWC should review your proposed actions if you are not working with NRCS. They can be contacted at the following offices (addresses to be inserted below by District Conservationist):

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

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Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

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To file a complaint, write USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 14<sup>th</sup> and Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, D.C., 20250-9410, or call (202) 720-5964 (voice and TDD).