

The Florida Panther needs our help
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What can leap 15 feet and run 35 miles per hour? What is secretive, disappearing rapidly and requires lots of space? What is tan and weighs between 80 and 130 pounds? What is Florida's state animal? What used to live throughout the Southeastern United States but now only exists in South Florida? Here's a hint: Less than 100 remain and they are on the critically endangered list. Have you guessed the critter? The Florida Panther (*Puma concolor coryi*) fits this description and they need our help.

It is estimated that only 80 – 100 Florida Panthers exist today. Once, these magnificent creatures inhabited not only Florida, but South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, Alabama, Tennessee and possibly even Texas. Today, the Florida Panther is restricted to less than 5% of its historic range. Adult male panthers have territories of up to 200 square miles. Because of habitat destruction and degradation, fragmentation of natural land and vehicle strikes, the Panther doesn't stand much of a chance these days. In addition, many people are very intolerant of these graceful animals and feel they are a nuisance. Panther territory is related to availability of prey. Because they require so much area to hunt, reproduce, and socialize, human development in panther territories reduces the chances of their future survival.

The beautiful cat is tan, often darker along the center of the back with a creamy white underside. Their ears, muzzle and tail tip are tinged with black. The male averages around 130 pounds and is generally from 6 to 8 feet in length including the tail. They stand about 2 ½ feet tall and their front paw width is usually larger than 2 inches. They are fully mature at 3 years and can live for 10 years providing they reach adulthood. The female averages 80 pounds and measures 5 to 7 feet. A little bit shorter in height than the male and not requiring quite as much territory, females mature at 1 ½ years old.

Panthers breed all year round. The male's territory generally overlaps with the females. Each breeding unit consists of 1 male and 2 to 5 females. Unfortunately, because of the small population of these graceful cats, inbreeding problems occur.

Females usually den in the spring and make their nests in palmetto thickets. They are pregnant for about 3 months and may birth 1 – 3 kittens. When born, the babies weigh between 4 – 8 ounces. They stay with mom in the den for 2 months. Once they are ready to venture out of the den, they are not ready to completely leave home and be fully independent until they are 1 ½ years old.

Panthers inhabit many types of habitats. Marsh, hardwood hammock, dry forest and wetlands are all included in their territories. They prefer dry areas, but have been known to cross over watery areas when they need to. Their favorite type of community is the pine flatwood, which is a slash pine overstory with a saw palmetto understory. Panthers use the palmettos as cover to hunt prey as well as areas to build their dens.

They dine on white-tailed deer, feral hogs, armadillos, raccoons, birds and small alligators. They are usually most active from dawn to dusk and prefer to rest during the heat of the day. They use

the ambush method to hunt. Once prey is found, they remain hidden and very quiet while slowly stalking the desired prey. Because cats have a small heart in relation to their body size, they are sprinters not long-distance runners. Once the cat has reached pouncing position, they leap out of hiding and entrap their prey. They sever the spinal cord by biting the back of the neck or they may suffocate it from a bite to the throat. On smaller animals, a bite to the skull will usually suffice. Once the prey has been killed, the panther uses its rough tongue to remove feathers or fur from the animal.

They use their sight, sense of smell and hearing while on the hunt. Since they hunt mostly at night, a membrane at the back of the eye reflects light for excellent night vision. Unlike domestic cat's elliptical shaped pupils, panthers are round. They also use olfactory senses to seek prey and find females when they are ready to breed. Their ears are shaped to collect sound and they hear higher frequencies than humans.

Florida Panthers are usually solitary animals that communicate through sense of smell. When these creatures rub against an object, chemicals from the scent glands on their cheeks are released. When raking its claws into a tree, scent from the feet is released. Or as with most cats, it will leave urine or feces to communicate. As far as sounds, panthers can purr, mew, chirp, whistle, hiss, growl and scream, but they do not roar.

Though many folks don't have much tolerance for the Florida Panther, these cats have never attacked a human. Unfortunately, because of lack of natural prey, they have been known to go after livestock and pets.

The Florida Panther was placed on the Endangered Species List in 1967 and still remains on the list. These beautiful creatures are depending on us to ensure their survival. There are many steps that citizens can take to help.

- Purchase panther license plates in Florida and contact your elected officials to voice support for panther preservation programs. The license plates generate more than \$1 million dollars a year and pay for the state's panther research and recovery programs.
- Support programs that protect panther habitat and stay informed on issues, contact legislators and let them know that there is citizen support for programs to help panthers.
- Keep up with environmental issues. Let your voice be heard at local governmental meetings. Support the building of passes under highways, research and study of panthers, genetic restoration and habitat conservation and protection.