

# Saving FLORIDA PANTHERS

**W**ith only an estimated 100 to 160 remaining in the wild, Florida panthers are one of the most endangered mammals in the world. Extensive development has left these big cats with little room to roam and dangerous highways to cross in their wide-ranging quests for food and mates.

Florida panthers once prowled and flourished in woodlands and swamps throughout the Southeast. Then European settlers arrived. The clear-cutting, building and other human activities that have destroyed, degraded and fragmented panther habitat began. And the misconceptions that have led to the persecution of these tawny predators took root.

Today panthers survive in a single population in south Florida. Measures taken under the Endangered Species Act to reverse inbreeding have strengthened this population. There are now more panthers than at any time since the 1950s, when they were still legally hunted in Florida. But housing and highway projects continue to slash and shrink precious panther habitat in booming south Florida, increasing the likelihood of encounters with humans and vehicles, pitting panthers against one another in deadly territorial battles and keeping these wild cats stalking a fine line between extinction and survival.

Defenders of Wildlife's efforts to help the Florida panther survive started four decades ago when we lobbied for its inclusion on the federal endangered species list. We have been fighting for panthers ever since—to secure current range and protect the large, interconnected tracts of wild land they need to establish new populations and thrive, to foster understanding of these solitary and secretive predators, and to address what is now one of the leading causes of panther deaths: collisions with motor vehicles.



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*“To save panthers, we have to save the land and work with people to build understanding and acceptance of these endangered predators.”*

—Laurie Macdonald  
Florida Director, Defenders of Wildlife



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A biologist (left) prepares to collect a panther killed along a stretch of road in Big Cypress National Preserve where collisions with vehicles have claimed several other panthers. Defenders is a high-profile proponent of measures to make roads safer for panthers, from simple panther crossing signs (right) to wildlife underpasses, fencing and high-tech warning systems.

## DECADES OF DEDICATION TO PANTHER CONSERVATION

When the Endangered Species Act became law in 1973, Florida panthers were one of the first species officially listed. In the decades since, Defenders of Wildlife has made Florida panther recovery a priority and secured a reputation as a leader in panther conservation. Here are some of the highlights and accomplishments of our involvement:

### 1980s: Preparing for Panther Recovery

- Participated in the development of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's first Florida panther recovery plan.
- Helped get wildlife underpasses and other measures to protect panthers from traffic included in the conversion of Alligator Alley, the main road through Big Cypress and the Everglades, to a major highway.
- Saw our efforts to create a sanctuary for panthers pay off with the establishment of the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge, 24,000 acres of prime panther habitat in southwestern Florida.

**Estimated panther population growth:**  
From 20-30 to 50 panthers

### 1990s: Improving the Odds for Panthers

- Supported the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's feasibility studies on establishing a second population of panthers in north Florida, evaluating captive breeding and improving the genetic diversity of the last remaining breeding population of panthers.
- Pushed for the feasibility-study-endorsed release of cougars, a close relative of Florida panthers, in south Florida to reduce inbreeding and increase genetic diversity. These efforts were rewarded with the relocation of eight female cougars from Texas to south Florida, a move credited with increasing the panther population and improving the odds of recovery.
- Made public outreach and partnership-building the foundation of our panther program in order to address the complex social issues associated with panther recovery.
- Successfully lobbied for the inclusion of wildlife crossings in the federal program that funds state roadway projects.

**Estimated panther population growth:**  
From 50 to 70 panthers

## 2000s: Collaborating to Protect Panthers and Their Habitat

- Published and distributed a much-needed guide to identifying panthers—and the tracks and other signs they leave. The guide has cut down on cases of bobcats, coyotes, dogs, house cats and other animals being mistaken for panthers and improved the reliability of reported panther sightings.
- Initiated efforts to reduce conflicts between people and panthers with the installation of panther-resistant enclosures for pets and livestock to serve as demonstration projects for rural residents. Also convinced the National Park Service to build a deer-proof fence around an education center in Big Cypress National Preserve instead of relocating a panther frequenting the area with her two kittens.
- Appointed to the Florida Panther Technical Advisory Council by the governor and chaired this group created to provide guidance to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission on matters related to panther recovery.
- Joined the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Panther Recovery Team and helped draft and revise the plan for restoring the species.
- Co-founded the Panther Outreach Team to advise the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on building public awareness and acceptance of panthers.
- Played a leadership role in establishing the Florida Panther Protection Program, a partnership of conservationists and land owners conceived to offer an alternative to legal action by working together to cap development, protect panthers and draft an overall habitat conservation plan for eastern Collier County.
- Helped save 50,000 acres of panther habitat by securing improvements to Collier County's rural lands stewardship program, which provides economic incentives and identifies development-appropriate areas.

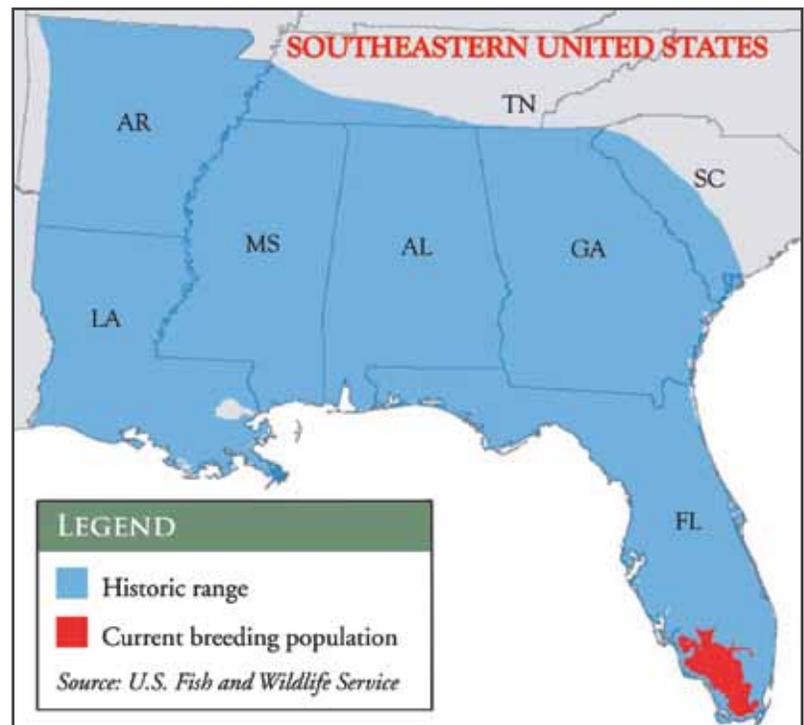
**Estimated panther population growth:  
From 70 to 100-160 panthers.**



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**Volunteers erect a panther-resistant enclosure as a demonstration project on the grounds of a county extension office. Defenders helps rural residents build these pens to keep livestock and pets safe at night—prime time for panthers.**

## PANTHER RANGE: PAST AND PRESENT



**The Florida panther, a cougar subspecies, once ranged throughout the Southeast. Then came people, persecution and the intensive development that has reduced panthers to a single breeding population in south Florida.**

## A MULTI-FACETED APPROACH TO PANTHER RECOVERY

Defenders' approach to panther conservation draws on our recognized success in re-establishing wolves in the West. Our approach is collaborative, solution-oriented, science-based and focused on four main objectives:

### 1. Protect and restore panther populations and habitat.

Defenders collaborates with county, state and federal officials, private landowners and other conservation groups to:

- Develop sound land-use and smart growth policies.
- Acquire land and conservation easements and restore ranch and wild lands that would expand the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge and a habitat network for Florida and beyond.
- Safeguard the only remaining natural passageway across the Caloosahatchee River, a route panthers are using to travel northward, movement that could eventually lead to the establishment of the additional breeding populations panthers need to survive and thrive.
- Smooth the way for panther reintroduction at additional sites in the Southeast by developing livestock compensation programs and proactive protection measures.

### 2. Reduce panther mortalities on roadways.

Collisions with vehicles take a terrible toll on panthers—16 were killed on Florida roads in 2010, a record-breaking 17 in 2009. To make the roads that crisscross panther habitat safer for these cats on the move, Defenders is working to:

- Advocate for regional transportation planning that addresses the needs of panthers and other wildlife.
- Hold consensus-building meetings with highway authorities, wildlife agencies, landowners and conservationists.
- Analyze and comment on specific road projects and work to improve or defeat plans that impact public conservation lands and other sensitive areas and bisect panther habitat.
- Secure support and funding for wildlife underpasses, detection systems, signs and other measures to improve the safety of rural highways.



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A panther kitten waits in the family den for the return of its mother, a radio-collared female that biologists are tracking. Knowing the mother is off hunting, the researchers can safely collect data on the young cat.

### 3. Help people and panthers safely coexist.

Increasing tolerance of panthers among ranchers and other residents is a high priority. To preserve the way of life for ranchers and other rural residents of existing and potential panther habitat, Defenders focuses on efforts to:

- Conduct workshops and outreach and provide demonstration projects and access to additional information on panthers and how to safely coexist with them.
- Assist landowners with funding and building predator-resistant enclosures to protect livestock and pets at night when panthers are prone to roam.
- Recruit and train volunteers to work with residents of rural areas on conflict prevention.
- Advise government agencies on proactive coexistence and compensation measures that protect people, pets, livestock and panthers.

### 4. Counter misinformation about panthers.

Communication and outreach are essential to building wide acceptance of Florida panthers and efforts to restore them. To rally support, Defenders looks for opportunities to:

- Dispel myths about panthers with scientific facts by providing the public and media with the best available information.
- Participate in special events like Florida's annual Save the Panther Day and the Florida Panther Festival we are launching in 2011 in partnership with other nonprofits, government agencies and businesses.
- Recruit panther advocates to add to the electronic mailing list we use to inform and mobilize citizens.

To learn more, visit [www.defenders.org](http://www.defenders.org).



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