

Did I See A Panther?¹

Larry W. Richardson and Martin B. Main²

Background

The Florida panther (*Puma concolor coryii*) is a subspecies of puma, which are also known as cougars and mountain lions. The Florida panther is extremely rare with an estimated 70-90 individuals in the wild. Although once distributed throughout the southeastern United States, today the range of the Florida panther is restricted to Florida, with the highest concentration of panthers occurring in south Florida. Because there are so few individuals remaining, the Florida panther is protected as an endangered species under State and Federal law.

Although panthers occur primarily in the wild areas of south Florida, individuals may potentially range throughout the state. One of the primary reasons that panthers may be seen in other areas than south Florida is the tendency for juveniles to disperse long distances in efforts to establish new territory. For example, during 1999-2000 a radio-collared juvenile male traveled from south Florida over 150 miles north to the Disney Wilderness Preserve near Orlando, Florida. This same panther also traveled eastward toward Merritt Island in Brevard County, and westward toward Tampa in Desoto County.

Are Florida panthers dangerous to humans? There has never been a documented attack by a Florida panther on a human being. These cats, although potentially dangerous, are extremely rare and extremely shy. To see a panther should be considered a once-in-a-lifetime event for most people.

Identifying a Florida Panther

Often people suspect they have seen a Florida panther. Florida panthers are rarely seen, however, and reported sightings typically are of a large animal dashing across a road at night. Consequently, panthers are sometimes confused with bobcats, dogs, coyotes, and even bears. Here are some simple tips that will help you determine whether you have seen one of these elusive and rare symbols of wild Florida.

Florida panthers are primarily nocturnal, which means they are most active during the night. They also are active during the evening and early morning hours. These active periods are when panthers hunt their preferred prey, white-tailed deer and wild hogs, and are the times when you are most likely to see a panther crossing a rural highway.

The most important visual characteristics that distinguish panthers from other animals are their tawny color, long tail, and typically large size, which may range from 60 lbs for juveniles to over 150 lbs for adult males (Figure 1). From nose to the tip of their tail, adults can be almost seven feet long. Bobcats, Floridas other native wild cat, rarely exceed 35 lbs. Bobcats (*Felis reflexus*) generally have a spotted coat and typically have a short (“bobbed”) tail, but some individuals can have a tail as much as a foot or longer in length (Figure 2). Although young panthers are spotted like a bobcat, these spots disappear after their first year of age, and the tails of juvenile panthers are much longer than tails of bobcats.

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2. Larry W. Richardson, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge, Naples, FL; Martin B. Main, assistant professor, Wildlife Ecology and Conservation Department, Southwest Florida Research and Education Center, Immokalee, UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

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Figure 1. Florida Panther

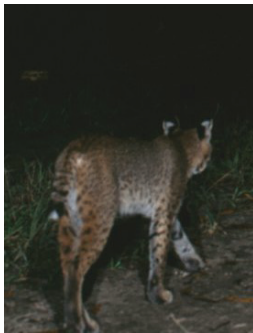


Figure 2. Bobcat

One of the most reliable ways of identifying the presence of a panther is by examining tracks. Adult panther tracks generally measure 3 inches long by 3.5 inches wide for the front paws, and hind paws are slightly smaller (Figure 3). Because cats, including panthers and bobcats, walk with their claws retracted, panther tracks do not leave claw imprints. The presence of claw imprints, therefore, is a sure way to recognize the track does not belong to a panther. Also, in addition to claw marks, the tracks of dogs, coyotes, (*Canis latrans*) and fox are longer than they are wide, whereas panther tracks are more round. Panther tracks are much larger than the tracks of bobcats, whose tracks are about half the length and width of a those from a panther. Even young panthers, barely old enough to leave the den with their mother, have feet significantly larger than an adult bobcat. The Florida black bear (*Ursus americanus*) also leaves a large track that sometimes lacks claw imprints. Bears, however, have five toes and panthers have only four, and the hind foot of a bear leaves an imprint that looks somewhat similar to that of a human foot.

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| <p>Fore</p> <p>Hind</p> <p>Coyote</p> | <p>Fore</p> <p>Hind</p> <p>Dog</p> | <p>Front</p> <p>L. 3 in. W. 3½ in.</p> <p>Hind</p> <p>L. 3 in. W. 3 in.</p> <p>Puma</p> |
| <p>Fore</p> <p>Hind</p> <p>Red Fox</p> | <p>Fore</p> <p>Hind</p> <p>Gray Fox</p> | <p>Front</p> <p>L. 1½ in. W. 1¾ in.</p> <p>Hind</p> <p>L. 1½ in. W. 1¾ in.</p> <p>Bobcat</p> |

Figure 3. Tracks of panthers and other Florida carnivores.

What Do You Do When You See A Panther?

If you see a live panther, there is no need to contact either the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. However, in the event that you identify a dead panther, such as might be seen along a highway you should call the FWC at 1-800-432-2046.

For those of you that do see a live panther, consider yourself lucky. The Florida panther is one of the most endangered mammals in North America. The panthers need for large areas of sparsely populated land and healthy populations of prey such as white-tailed deer make the panther a true symbol of the remaining wild areas of Florida.

For Additional Information

Florida Panther Net, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission: <http://www.panther.state.fl.us/>

The Florida Panther Society, Inc.: <http://www.atlantic.net/~oldfla/panther/panther.html>

