



Living With Wildlife in the Southeast

Coexisting With Florida Panthers



From the Florida Keys and Everglades in the south to the Panhandle in the northwest, the Sunshine State is home to some of the country's most diverse and special ecosystems—and most extensive development. As human communities encroach on the wild lands that remain, people are coming into closer and closer contact with wildlife, including the endangered Florida panther. As a result, collisions with motor vehicles and conflicts with livestock hinder panther recovery and decrease human tolerance for sharing the landscape with this top predator. Defenders recognizes that helping people coexist with the Florida panther is vital to building the acceptance and support needed to save the species.

COURTESY DAVID SHINDLE

Through partnerships, education, research support, public outreach and advocacy, Defenders is working to foster understanding of Florida panthers and to help people share the landscape with these endangered predators.

Limited space

Florida panthers historically roamed the forests and swamps of eight states throughout the Southeast. Persecution, hunting, clear-cutting and other human activities associated with European settlement and expansion caused panther numbers to drop precipitously. Thanks to state and federal protections, the population has increased from a low of perhaps 20 individuals a few decades ago to an estimated 100 to 160 panthers. With all of these animals in a single breeding population with limited range in the state's southern tip, Florida panthers remain one of the most imperiled animals in the world.

Public lands in south Florida are not extensive enough to support the existing panther population. These wide-ranging predators need a system of public and private lands for territory, prey and mates and to expand their range northward into suitable habitat. With their habitat usurped by housing projects and fragmented by roads, panthers are frequently encountering people, livestock and motor vehicles.



COURTESY MARK LOTZ/FLORIDA FISH AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION COMMISSION

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Clockwise from left: A panther kitten waits for its mother, a radio-collared female that biologists are tracking, to return to the family den. A sign alerts drivers to be on the lookout for panthers. Defenders' volunteers erect a panther-resistant enclosure designed to keep pets and livestock safe at night when panthers are most active.

Coping through coexistence

With reports of panther depredations on livestock on the rise, and collisions with motor vehicles now the leading human cause of panther deaths, strategies to coexist with these rare felines are more important than ever. Through partnerships, education, research support, public outreach and advocacy, Defenders is working to foster understanding of Florida panthers and to help humans and panthers share the landscape. We've already made significant progress:



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- Improved road safety for panthers by facilitating implementation of slower nighttime speed zones and the installation of wildlife underpasses and fencing; securing funding for panther crossing signs and high-tech motion sensors that warn drivers to slow down when large animals are approaching the road; and advocating for conservation-minded transportation planning that considers the dangers motor vehicle traffic and habitat fragmentation present for panthers.
- Funded and installed panther-resistant enclosures for pets and livestock, hosted workshops, initiated demonstration projects, and distributed materials in rural residential areas on responsible homeowner practices for safely coexisting with panthers.
- Recruited and trained volunteers for the Panther Citizen Assistance Taskforce (PCAT), a group of citizen scientists and activists who share information on protecting pets and livestock and are prepared to respond to reports of panther sightings.

- Participated in a panther depredation workgroup to secure support for research and policy development leading to a state panther coexistence and incentive program.
- Provided support and trail cameras to University of Florida researchers investigating depredation patterns on private lands by tracking panthers and calves.
- Helped organize and fund the annual Florida Panther Festival, an event held in collaboration with other nonprofits, government agencies and businesses to build acceptance by celebrating the panther and sharing information about living with our native wildlife.
- Supported and provided training for wildlife professionals on the human dimensions of panther conservation and recovery.

Successful coexistence efforts like these are essential to the growth and northward expansion of the Florida panther population that are necessary for the recovery of the species.



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To learn more about Defenders' coexistence work, visit www.defenders.org