

# Saving FLORIDA PANTHERS

**W**ith only an estimated 120 to 230 adults remaining in the wild, Florida panthers are one of the most endangered mammals in the country.

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 mostly in south Florida. Measures taken under the Endangered Species Act to reverse inbreeding have strengthened this population. And there is new hope for range expansion now that females have crossed the Caloosahatchee River. There are more panthers currently 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.

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 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 a leading cause of panther deaths: collisions with motor vehicles.

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

—Elizabeth Fleming, Senior Florida Representative



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## WHY WE NEED PANTHERS

1. Florida panthers are an umbrella species; saving them and the big, wild spaces they need (an average of 200 square miles for a single male) also protects the many different plants and animals that share their habitat.
2. Panthers are top predators that help keep deer and other prey populations in check and can benefit the ecosystem from top to bottom.
3. Preserving enough undeveloped land for panthers assures the quality of the soil, water and air on which all species, including us, depend. The groundwater so vital to Florida ecosystems and people, for example, is recharged in the large tracts of wild land where Florida panthers live.
4. Panthers also use agricultural areas near wild lands, so protecting panthers also protects Florida's working landscapes.
5. We owe it to the schoolchildren who chose the panther as Florida's state animal in 1982, to today's children and to future generations to make sure this beautiful and powerful symbol of the wilds of the American Southeast endures.



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 leading 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 to Interstate 75, a major road through Big Cypress and the Everglades.
- 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 habitat in southwest Florida.

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

### 1990s: Improving the Odds for Panthers

- Established a Florida program and hired in-state staff.
- 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 pumas, 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 pumas 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



## 2000 to 2010: Collaborating to Protect Panthers

- Published and distributed a much-needed guide to identifying panthers—and the tracks and other sign 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 sightings.
- Joined the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Panther Recovery Team and helped draft and revise the plan for restoring the species. Also co-founded the Panther Outreach Team to advise the federal agency on building public awareness and acceptance of panthers.
- Launched Defenders' predator-resistant enclosure program to protect small livestock and pets from panthers and other predators in rural residential areas.
- Established the Panther Citizens Assistance Taskforce, trained volunteers who provide information on safely sharing the landscape with panthers.

**Estimated panther population growth:**  
From 70 to 100-120 panthers

## 2011-2020: Furthering Panther Recovery

- Helped launch the annual Florida Panther Festival.
- Collaborated with landowners and conservation groups to create the Florida Panther Protection Program to cap development, protect panthers and work toward a landscape-level habitat conservation plan for eastern Collier County to prevent piecemeal development that fragments habitat.
- Named as the conservation representative on the Florida Panther Recovery Implementation Team and as a member of its Transportation SubTeam, helped develop the Southwest Florida Panther Hot Spots map to guide decision making and funding for wildlife crossings and other safety measures to reduce panther mortality.

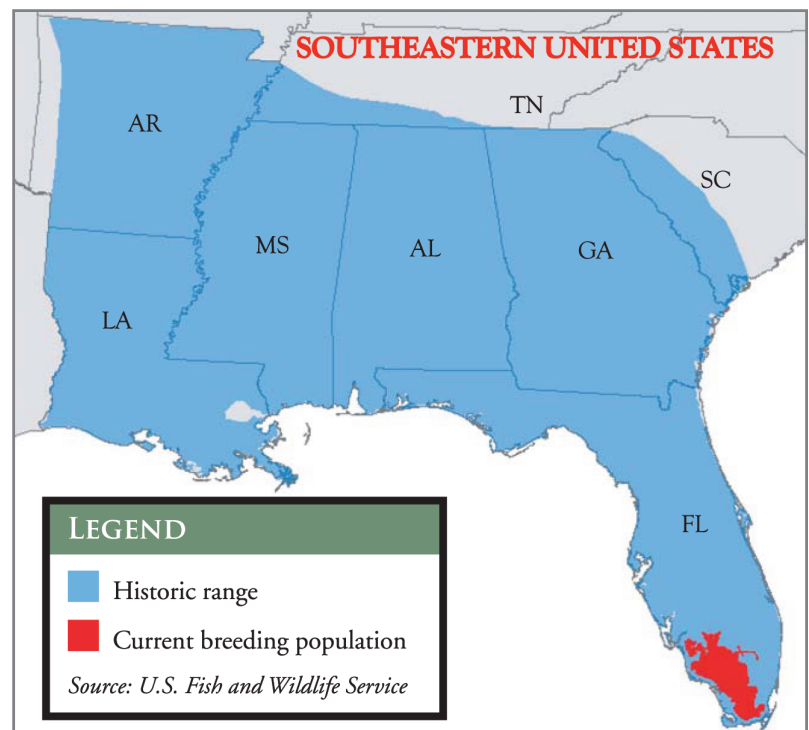
**Estimated panther population growth:**  
From 100-120 to 120-230 panthers



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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.

## PANTHER RANGE: PAST AND PRESENT



The Florida panther 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 imperiled species in other parts of the country. Our approach is collaborative, solution-oriented, science-based and focused on three main objectives:

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

With development continuing to snatch up wild and agricultural lands in existing and potential Florida panther range, collaborating with county, state and federal officials, private land owners and other conservation groups to develop sound land-use and smart growth policies is a high priority. We are now deeply involved in commenting on a habitat conservation plan, a legally binding, long-range vision for the permanent protection of the panther and other imperiled species, being developed under the Endangered Species Act for fast-growing Collier County.

We are working for land acquisition, conservation easements and restoration of ranch and wild lands that would expand the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge and other areas in the Greater Everglades. We are also pursuing the protection and restoration of lands leading to the passageway across the Caloosahatchee River, a route panthers are using to travel northward.

As a member of the recovery team, we are looking at ways to assist the Florida panther in expanding its range so it can thrive into the future.

### 2. Reduce panther mortalities on roadways.

Collisions with vehicles take a terrible toll on panthers—a record 34 were killed in 2016 and 24 in 2017. To make the roads that crisscross panther habitat safer for these cats on the move, Defenders advocates for regional transportation planning that addresses the needs of panthers and other wildlife.

We 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. We also make recommendations and secure support and funding for wildlife underpasses, detection systems, signs and other measures to improve the safety of rural highways.

To build the political will and capital to keep roadways safe for wildlife, we hold consensus-building meetings with highway authorities, wildlife agencies, landowners and conservationists and reach out to the public to get citizens involved.



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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.**

### 3. Counter misinformation and help people and panthers safely coexist.

Defenders conducts extensive community outreach to dispel myths about panthers with scientific facts and to build acceptance of efforts to restore them. We use print publications, websites, blogs, media campaigns, workshops, conferences and public presentations to get the word out and build support for panthers. We participate in special events like the annual Save the Florida Panther Day and the Florida Panther Festival that we helped launch in 2011 in partnership with other nonprofits, government agencies and businesses. Through these events, we actively recruit volunteers and add to the panther advocates listserv we use to inform and mobilize citizens.

Applying what we've learned from our extensive experience with carnivores and ranchers in the western United States, we provide residents of rural areas with information on how to safely coexist with panthers. Our trained recruits help landowners fund and build predator-resistant enclosures to protect livestock and pets at night when panthers are prone to roam. Defenders is working with others on the panther recovery team to improve habitat stewardship incentives and livestock compensation programs to expand acceptance for panther range expansion.

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



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