

<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/nation/la-na-panthers9may09,1,2635626.story>

THE NATION

Panthers Start to Peek Out of the Shadows

Residents of a remote part of Florida are divided over what to do now that some of the massive felines are coming out in daylight.

By John-Thor Dahlburg
Time Staff Writer

May 9, 2004

BIG CYPRESS NATIONAL PRESERVE, Fla. — In this corner of the country, nature, on occasion, bites back. Alligators have been known to slither from the primeval ooze and snatch unsuspecting pets. Surfers sometimes get attacked by sharks. Sinkholes open up and swallow homes.

Carol Balman, who lives west of Miami in a former Navy bus that's been converted into a cozy home, experienced one of those Florida moments recently: She was sitting outside with visitors when a friend's Chihuahua began to growl. A tawny Florida panther, a superb killing machine that can reach 150 pounds, came into view.

Over the past six months, Balman said, she has seen the normally furtive and nocturnal animals at least eight times near her home — often in broad daylight.

"They've been in the yard, and I've had them in here as close as the fire," the 55-year-old Balman said, pointing to a campfire ring between the road and her bus. "They've been walking down the road. They're cool to watch, actually."

The question of what to do about the unusually sociable predators — one of the world's most endangered species — has divided residents of this isolated stretch of the Everglades about an hour's drive west of Miami.

From a conservation perspective, the good news is that the number of Florida panthers seems to be on the increase — from 30 to 50 seven years ago to between 80 and 100 now, said Bob DeGross of the National Park Service.

"We are trying to protect and preserve this large predator, but there are pressures from all around," said DeGross, spokesman for Big Cypress National Preserve. "Most people want to know there are cats out there, but don't want them attacking their livestock or threatening lives."

This 750,000-acre expanse of wetlands and hammocks north of Everglades National Park provides habitat for black bear, white-tailed deer, manatees, more than 300 species of birds and a score or so of hardy souls like Balman who have fled city or suburban life.

Wildlife officials surmise that a female panther wandered near people's homes during last year's rainy season, when downpours and bugs thin out the number of residents, and got acclimated enough to lose her fear of humans. She gave birth to two offspring, a male and a female.

Balman, a former state employee, said she wasn't scared of the carnivores and didn't want them disturbed, even though one killed a neighbor's pig.

Then again, the slight woman who has lived in the Everglades for three years is comfortable cutting the grass while a 12-foot alligator basks in the sun nearby.

"To me, the panthers have a right to be out here," Balman said. "This is why you come to the Everglades: the animals."

But the Miccosukee Indians, whose reservation lies east of the wildlife preserve, have called the appearance of the panthers a tragedy waiting to happen.

The tribe has demanded that state and federal wildlife agencies catch and move the cats; if the panthers enter tribal property, officials there have warned, they will be killed.

"We will not allow these animals to harm anyone, especially children," Billy Cypress, the tribe's chairman, wrote the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission in February.

The panthers, a subspecies of mountain lion, are on the Endangered Species List, and killing one would amount to a federal crime. The law makes exceptions, however, if an animal is destroyed to protect human beings.

According to Miccosukee leaders, the cats' presence could force the cancellation of the Green Corn Dance — a traditional religious rite that heralds the coming of the summer rains that replenish the Everglades. Outsiders are not permitted to attend, and tribal officials refused to divulge this year's scheduled date for the ritual.

Some Miccosukee parents, concerned that their children might be attacked by the panthers, have stopped letting them wait outside for the school bus, opting to drive them to school instead. Other members of the tribe, however, seem less worried.

"It's always something," Angie Cypress, 25, said as she buckled her year-old son into her pickup truck outside a tribal restaurant on U.S. Highway 41, known as the Tamiami Trail. She and her neighbors have been instructed not to put trash outside, she said, because the smell might attract the panthers. Cypress said she didn't let her older children — ages 7, 6 and 3 — play outside anyway because of her husband's big dogs.

To keep the cats away from inhabited areas, wildlife officials earlier this year used hounds to tree the 80-pound mother and her offspring. After the animals had been tranquilized, officials fastened radio collars around their necks to be able to track their movements. In March, when the cats were spotted again near people's homes, they were plunked in the rear with slingshots to teach them to be less bold.

Since then, they have behaved more like Florida panthers customarily do, avoiding humans and going on the prowl only after dark.

"We haven't really seen or heard of any sightings of the cats since late March," DeGross said. "We feel the cats have responded to our conditioning as they should, basically taking off as soon as they have contact with people."

Despite the belief of Balman and some of the other Everglades homesteaders, preserve officials said there were never more than three of the errant cats.

Just west of Balman's bus, freelance photographer Lucky Cole has been carrying a gun since his two encounters with the panthers. The first time, the animals watched him as they lay in the road 200 feet away, not at all intimidated by the roar of his Harley-Davidson motorcycle. The second time, Cole, 61, had opened the gate to his property and begun walking back to his trailer when he sensed he was not alone. The photographer wheeled around and found a panther following him.

During a recent photo shoot, the cheerful, bearlike Cole seemed more concerned that his female models might be bitten by mosquitoes than panthers. Living in the Everglades, which has been his home since 1991, is about learning to coexist, he said.

It's "like having an aggressive alligator in your pond," Cole said. "If you do, you don't go swimming there. It doesn't take a lot of brainpower."

If you want other stories on this topic, search the Archives at latimes.com/archives.

TMSReprints

Article licensing and reprint options