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Tracking Panthers in Highlands County

“My passion is endangered cats,” says biologist Dr. Jennifer Korn, who studies Florida panthers. Most of these panthers live in South Florida, but Korn focuses on the ones in the rest of the state. Until recently, that meant only the few adventurous South Florida males who crossed the Caloosahatchee River in search of territory and mates. But after photo proof of a mother and kittens on Babcock Ranch Preserve, Charlotte County, in March 2017 - the first clear documentation of a female north of the river in over 40 years - Korn’s work got more exciting. Also in March, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission biologists documented a second female north of the river, near Venus, Florida, Highlands County, just a few miles from Archbold Biological Station.

Korn and other biologists working with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission track panthers using motion sensor game cameras purchased with funding from specialty license plates. “Some people think that we snuggle panthers all day, but actually seeing a cat or touching a cat is a small part of the job. It is a lot of remote camera work, working with the public for education and outreach, and working with private landowners.”

One of Korn’s partner sites is Archbold Biological Station, where she has a camera installed. The first documented panther sighting on the property was in 1947 by Richard Archbold, who founded the Station in 1941. That record, and many others, were preserved by the Station’s first Executive Director, the late Dr. James Layne.

“Dr. Layne was fascinated by the Florida panther throughout his scientific career,” explains Joseph Gentili, Special Collections Archivist at Archbold Biological Station. “His papers and reports archived at Archbold have more shelf space dedicated to the Florida panther than any other species. He worked closely with government agencies to try to ensure that the Panther had a future here in Florida.” Layne was on the federal Florida Panther Recovery Team from 1975-1982 and the state’s Florida Panther Advisory Council from 1988-1995.

Florida panthers were listed as a federally endangered subspecies in 1967, five years before the Endangered Species Act. In 1978, Layne wrote a colleague about the number of Florida panthers, saying “we believe that the state population may consist of 100-200 individuals.” After a low point in the early 1990s, when biologists estimated less than 30 adults in the state, the panthers have been recovering. Today, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission estimates between 120-230 wild adults.

“Having females north of the Caloosahatchee river is a game changer, but hopefully it is just the starting point,” states Korn. In fact, the Charlotte County kittens were found on a working ranch. Panther breeding north of the river is a step toward achieving the US Fish and Wildlife Service’s recovery goal of establishing three populations of at least 240 individuals each. This effort faces challenges, such as Florida’s growing human population, loss of habitat agricultural lands that are converted to housing developments, and road mortality from vehicles.

Korn believes that a combination of science and sensible solutions will help the panthers. “Road kill is very high. If we can figure out which bridges are already important corridors for panthers, the Florida Department of Transportation can add “shelves” on the sides of bridges especially for panthers. That is what they did at one location on State Road 80, and panthers use this bridge often.”

To thrive, the panthers will need Floridians to work together. Public lands, partnerships with conservation organizations like Archbold Biological Station and Florida’s private rural lands, especially cattle ranches, are together the key to panther success.

Even though Korn recognizes that people have mixed feelings about panthers, she believes coordinated conservation can bring people together. “Even if you are not a panther fan, but want to see Florida preserved, you can get behind the panther. Panthers are a great way to help Florida, because the land is going to be protected, too.”

Korn previously worked as a Florida Panther Specialist for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, and is now a Wildlife Biologist with Johnson Engineering, Inc. She continues her work in panther conservation through partnerships with private landowners and non-governmental organizations. The more Floridians learn about this rare and elusive animal the greater their curiosity and commitment to its survival. Visit the *Path of the Panther* Facebook page to learn more.

Photo 1: Panther Biologist Dr. Jennifer Korn examines panther tracks in Highlands County. Photo by Dustin Angell



Photo 1: Panther Biologist Dr. Jennifer Korn checks a game camera in Highlands County. Photo by Dustin Angell



Photo 2: Panther Biologist Dr. Jennifer Korn sees a Florida Panther on a game camera in Highlands County. Photo by Dustin Angell



Photo 3: Panther Biologist Dr. Jennifer Korn stops for a photo while checking game cameras in Highlands County. Photo by Dustin Angell

