

DON JUAN

The Capture of Florida Panther #79

by Dennis Giardina

Because I have the opportunity to work “hands-on” with Florida panthers in the wild, and because I’ve been asked frequently about this issue, I’d like to mention a couple of things about the capture of Florida Panther 79, “Don Juan,” in Copeland on February 16. I feel fortunate to be able to contribute in whatever small way to the recovery and management of this species and it is my pleasure to share a bit of it with all of you FOF members.

At ten years plus, Florida Panther 79, was certainly approaching old age for a male panther but he appeared to be very healthy and presumably still able to hunt and kill large, wild prey. About two weeks or so before he was captured and taken into captivity, he started to prey upon domestic animals at several different residences around the western Big Cypress National Preserve. After his second or third depredation, the BCNP Panther Capture Team caught him, inspected him and then relocated him to the far eastern Big Cypress National Preserve. Within two days however, he traveled over twenty miles back to the scene of one of his previous crimes and he tried to get back into a chicken coop that he had torn open several days earlier. I say tried because between then and the first time he visited, Big Cypress personnel strung up an electric wire fence around the chicken cage. I wish I could have seen his reaction when he discovered the electric fence but apparently it shocked him all the way across State Road 29 and into the Fakahatchee Strand Preserve which is interesting because at least while he wore an active radio collar, it is a place that he was never known to visit.

National Park Service and Fish and Wildlife Commission personnel began to notify people in the Copeland community about the presence of Panther 79 and within a day or so, he found a pot-bellied pig in a resident’s backyard and killed it. Strangely though, just as he had done in at least one other attack on livestock during the preceding weeks, he did not eat it. On that morning, after the panther

recovery team received word of yet another attack, the decision was made to remove Panther 79 from the wild. Members of both capture teams, law enforcement agents and media people convened in the lot next to yard where the pig was killed. Soon thereafter, the panther trackers entered the dense brush behind the house with two hound dogs. Within a short amount of time, using a telemetry receiver to follow the signal of the big cat’s radio-collar, they reached the edge of a little hammock a couple of hundred feet west of Jane’s Scenic Drive. They released the hounds and the startled panther quickly climbed a big live oak tree surrounded by a thicket of Brazilian pepper.

The signal was given for the capture team to enter the hammock and take position as one anesthetic-bearing dart was fired expertly into the cat’s hind quarters. As the post-injection clock ticked, the capture team began to clear the pepper, vines and brush from the area beneath the branch where Panther 79 perched nervously. The capture net was spread out and pulled tight. The six persons holding the net shifted anxiously following Panther 79’s movements anticipating where and how he would fall. At six minutes post injection it became apparent that Panther 79 had lost consciousness in the canopy and was not going to fall.

At that point I was given the command to climb and I ascended the pepper branches up to the oak tree trunk as quickly as I could. When I approached the semi-sedated panther, he reacted to me and I was cautioned from the ground to back off for a minute to let the drug take a bit more of an affect. Panther 79 was mostly still when I resumed my approach and I stretched the rope I carried with me underneath his forelegs and around his back. I tied a knot and slipped it down tight. I tossed the bulk of the climbing rope down to the team and began to try to work the heavy cat out of the forked branches where he was hung up. I had very little leverage; I couldn’t stand up to lift him so I had to wrap my arms around him and work him towards me to position him to be lowered down. As I did, he growled, our heads so close I could feel his breath on my face. I eased him back away from me and he gave a defensive hiss, his eyes fixing upon me, then crossing and rolling into unconsciousness.

In a calm, non-threatening manner I talked to Panther 79 as I do all the panthers I have to interact with, telling him to just take it easy and to work with me, and good boy... good boy. I pulled the claws of his rear paw out from deep in the branch and slowly rolled him over the left side. What complicated that maneuver was a small broken branch beneath the cat that I didn't see, which caught underneath the noose right in the center of his chest and for a minute, Panther 79 hung in mid air suspended by it. Fearing that in spite of all my effort he would slip out of the noose and plummet to the ground, I tried to lift the rope over the six-inch stub but I couldn't. No one on the ground could see the look of sheer panic on my face as I grabbed hold of that branch with both hands and frantically rocked back and forth on it with all my weight. After a few seconds I felt it give way and it broke enough to finally lift the loop over it. I yelled to the team below to take up the slack and pull hard. In a dream-like state of relief and elation, I watched Panther 79 slowly descending. Once he touched the ground, he regained consciousness somewhat and the team piled on to pin him down and sedate him. I remained in the canopy for a minute longer, catching my breath, looking down, feeling extremely lucky and grateful.

Panther 79 was taken to the University of Florida, School of Veterinary Medicine where he was given a full examination. Nothing abnormal was found. In every physical sense, Panther 79 appeared to be in good health. At the moment, Panther 79 is living away from the public eye at Busch Gardens. He seems to be adapting to captivity. He is eating. Caged wild panthers have been known to bite relentlessly at their chain-link enclosures and break their canines. So far he has not. The question remains though, why did Panther 79 leave the wilderness and wild prey and shift to hanging around humans and preying on their pets and livestock? I don't know if we'll ever know. Another question is did the capture teams and their agencies react appropriately and expeditiously to this situation? Did logic and science and the protocol of the problem panther response plan effectively guide the decisions and actions made on all levels? I would have to say yes. Regardless how anyone may have felt personally about removing this magnificent animal from the wild and putting him

in captivity for the rest of his life, everyone knew it was what needed to be done. As the Florida panther population continues to grow and their active range continues to expand, we will have to be vigilant. We will continue to communicate with individuals and communities in rural areas to provide information about protecting pets and livestock, and avoiding encounters with panthers. At the same time, we have to be cautious not to let emotional, irrational or unscientific concerns dictate our responses or management strategies. I have been saying, and I believe, that human beings and panthers can coexist. We have to be aware of them and take precautions not to attract them. They have to remain very wary of us.

Dennis Giardina is actively involved with Florida Panther Capture and is the Manager of Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park.



“Cougar” McBride with Florida Panther #79 after his capture on February 16, 2006.