

Florida Panther

National Wildlife Refuge

photo: Larry Richardson



photo: USFWS



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Refuge Facts

- Established: June 1989.
- Acres: 26,400 located in Collier County.
- Refuge lies in 14th Congressional District of Florida.
- Location: The refuge is located 20 miles east of Naples, Florida north of Interstate 75 and west of SR 29. The refuge headquarters is in east Naples at Exit 15 of Interstate 75.

Natural History

- Refuge is situated in the upper segment of the Fakahatchee Strand of the Big Cypress Swamp.
- Florida panthers den, hunt, and travel over refuge; 5-11 panthers use refuge over a given month.
- Concentrations of water birds, wading birds including wood storks (several rookeries).
- Concentrations of rare tropical orchids.
- Refuge contains 15,000 acres of woodland, 11,400 acres of mix swamp and prairie.

Financial Impact of Refuge

- 14 person staff.
- Refuge closed to general public use, though limited tours account for 500 annual visits.
- Current budget (FY 00) \$1,174,000.
- Local benefits resulting from government expenditures in FY94 are \$1.44 million.

Refuge Objectives

- Provide optimum habitat conditions for Florida panther and endangered species.
- Restore and conserve natural diversity and ecological function of refuge fauna and flora.

- Implement environmental education promoting Florida panther and south Florida ecosystem.
- Promote cooperative management of natural resources within the Big Cypress Watershed.
- Provide appropriate opportunities for compatible public use.

Management Tools

- Prescribed fire.
- Exotic plant control through mechanical and chemical means.
- Education/Interpretation.
- Law Enforcement.
- Partnerships: Florida Division of Forestry, Refuge Friends Group, National Park Service, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

Public Use Opportunities

- Interpretive trail.
- Limited refuge tours.

Calendar of Events

January: Cooperative panther captures.

May: Migratory Bird Day

October: National Wildlife Refuge Week.

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Questions and Answers

How many panthers use the refuge?

On a monthly time frame, 5-11 panthers use a portion of the refuge for hunting, traveling to other areas, loafing, or denning.

Why is the refuge closed to the public?

Public access to the refuge has not been allowed since the refuge's inception because various outdoor recreation activities would generally disturb panthers or their prey and this would be inconsistent with the refuge purpose of providing optimal panther habitat. However, refuge staff and its cooperating Friends' Group are preparing an interpretive trail that is tentatively planned to be open in early 2001. Furthermore notwithstanding disturbance to panther habitat, the refuge is not very accessible for public use. Few entry points exist and the existing roads make for rough travel and are easily degraded with extended use. Also, there are over three million acres of public lands in South Florida. Much of this land is available for hunting, fishing, hiking, camping, wildlife observation, and other outdoor recreational pursuits. Six nature/visitor centers are operated by various groups and all of these sites are within one hour's drive of Naples.

Where can I see a panther in the wild?

The Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve immediately south of the refuge has a primitive road- Jane's Scenic Drive that traverses through panther habitat. While panthers are very secretive and chances are slim to actually see one, you may get lucky either driving this road or walking an old logging road off of Jane's Scenic.

Why do we burn the refuge?

The refuge staff with other professionals apply prescribed fire to various habitats to accomplish a variety of objectives. Fire is an inexpensive and efficient tool that has been used for thousands of years to clear the undergrowth and revitalize the understory species. Fire on the refuge is used to maintain native plant communities and improve wildlife habitat especially that for panthers. Also, we employ prescribed

fire successfully to reduce the natural fuel loads where we can reduce the risk of severe damage to woodlands that could otherwise occur with a rampant wildfire. In other words, fire danger to habitat and to our neighbors' property is lowered through the careful application of fire.

How do we keep up with or study the panthers?

Our biologists along with state biologists follow previously captured panthers through use of radiotelemetry. This technique involves receiving a radio signal from a cat which has had a radio transmitter attached to its neck. Following these signals enables a biologist to: locate the panther in its habitat, determine where and when panthers may come in contact for breeding, locate den sites, determine travel patterns, and learn about when a panther dies. Our staff may on occasion interpret panther tracks left in trackable areas on the refuge.