



FLORIDA PANTHER

A GUIDE TO RECOGNIZING THE FLORIDA PANTHER, ITS TRACKS AND SIGN



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Figure 1. Habitat loss and fragmentation are the main threats to the Florida panther.

in recent years several males have traveled northward into central and northeast Florida, and one even dispersed to central Georgia near the Alabama border.

As recently as 40 years ago, it was not known if any wild panthers remained in Florida. Since the presence of a small population was confirmed in south Florida in the 1970s, research, monitoring and habitat conservation efforts have helped the species increase in number and overall health. Recovery actions over the last 25 years, particularly genetic restoration initiated in 1995 to save the Florida panther from extinction, have enabled the population to grow from a low of 12 to 20 to an estimated 100 to 160 panthers today.

During this same period, Florida's human population has grown from about 5 million to over 19 million people. The Florida panther remains threatened with extinction -- its greatest threat today being development and fragmentation of its habitat.

Because of increases in numbers of both people and panthers, urban and suburban areas now interface with panther habitat, expanding the possibility of human-panther interactions. Since 2004, panther encounters have become more frequent in south Florida, including instances of panthers preying upon livestock or pets. To address this situation, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), National Park Service (NPS) and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) implemented a *Florida Panther Response Plan* to provide guidance on consistent handling of interactions while promoting public safety and recognizing the need to recover an endangered species.

Defenders works with landowners and agencies on conflict avoidance programs and produced this guide to assist the public in identifying and understanding panthers and other wildlife in Florida.

Figure 2. A Florida panther has long legs and a long tail.



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FLORIDA PANTHER: PAST AND PRESENT

The Florida panther (*Puma concolor coryi*) is a unique subspecies of *Puma* (*Puma concolor*) that is found throughout North America (Figures 1 and 2). *Puma* subspecies are known by many names – puma, cougar, mountain lion, painter, catamount and panther. The Florida panther, the last *puma* subspecies still surviving in the eastern United States, is at a crossroads. Nearly extirpated by early settlers from its historic range spanning eight southeastern states, the panther has been restricted to less than 5% of its former range. Only a single breeding population now survives in the southern tip of Florida (Figure 3). While most Florida panthers reside south of Lake Okeechobee,

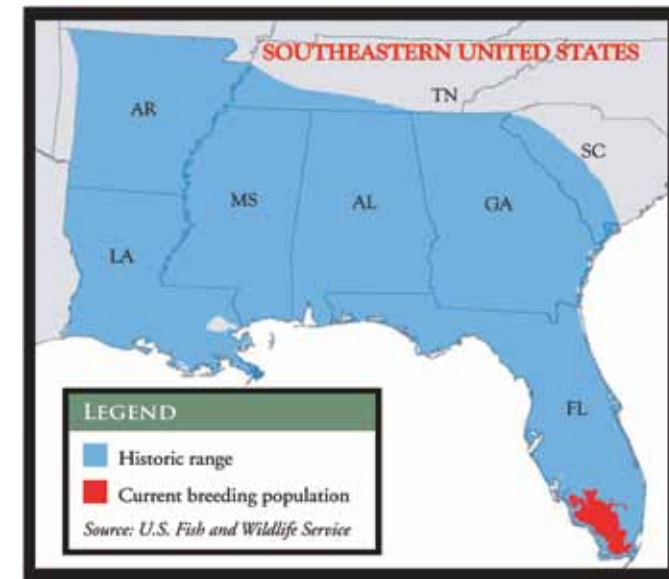


Figure 3. The Florida panther, which once ranged throughout much of the southeastern United States, has been pushed into a fraction of its historic range by past persecution and today's unchecked development.



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Figure 4. The Florida panther is a solitary animal and prefers to inhabit wilderness areas away from people and development.

INTRODUCTION TO IDENTIFYING PANTHERS

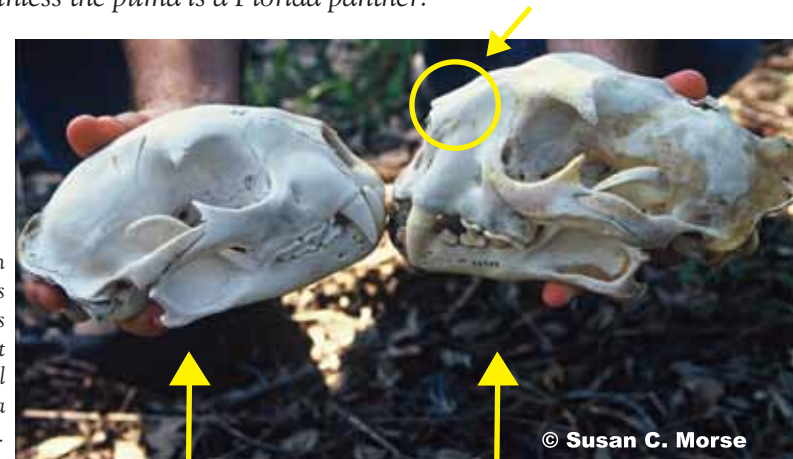
The Florida panther has a tawny brown back and pale gray underside (Figure 4). Males measure nearly seven feet long from nose to the tip of the tail. While males may exceed 150 pounds, they weigh an average 120 to 130 pounds and stand 23 to 27 inches high at the shoulder. Females are smaller, reaching a length of about six feet and weighing 70 to 75 pounds. Kittens are born with dark spots that fade away as they become adults (Figure 5). Throughout this guide, the word “puma” is used to describe photo images of pumas or puma sign unless the puma is a Florida panther.



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Figure 5. Spotted fur helps to camouflage vulnerable panther kittens from predators.

Figure 6. Florida panther (on right) skull characteristics are unique. The skull is relatively broad and flat with highly arched nasal bones, giving the face a roman-nosed appearance.



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WESTERN PUMA

FLORIDA PANTHER



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Figure 7. An adult Florida panther has a long tail; its inner legs and belly are pale and without spots and its ears are rounded.



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Figure 8. A Florida bobcat has a shorter tail with dark rings around it, spots on its belly and legs, and pointed ears with white patches on the back. Most will have tiny black ear tufts on the tip of each ear, bars and stripes that accent the face and mouth and a ruff of fur encircling the head.

ANIMALS COMMONLY MISIDENTIFIED AS PANTHERS

Many animals are mistaken for Florida panthers, especially in low light or at a distance. Although reported panther sightings are numerous, investigations reveal that most sightings are misidentifications of other animals, such as deer, domestic dogs, coyotes, foxes, bobcats, bears or other species. Sightings of “black panthers” are commonly reported; however, a melanistic (black) panther has never been confirmed in Florida or anywhere else in North America. Other cat species, such as bobcats, jaguars and leopards, do have dark color phases that occur more frequently in densely forested habitats.

1. Bobcat © Jennifer Benoit
2. Red fox © Susan C. Morse
3. Florida black bear © David S. Maehr
4. Bobcat drinking out of birdbath © Karen King
5. Bobcat peeking through grass © Susan C. Morse
6. White-tailed deer © Mark Lotz/infra-red motion sensitive trail camera, FWC
7. Domestic cat and bobcat © Jennifer Benoit
8. Coyote © David Shindle/infra-red motion sensitive trail camera, FWC
9. Bobcat lying down © Arline Erdrich
10. Coyote © Susan C. Morse
11. Bobcat at night © Carolyn Bright
12. Bobcat in yard © Jennifer Benoit
13. Golden retriever © Shawn Olson



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PANTHER TRACKS

 Just as a human hand has five fingers, a panther's front foot has five toes, but only four register in its track impression: the toe corresponding to the human thumb does not register. Look for four teardrop-shaped toe prints, asymmetrically arranged just like the four fingers on your hand: a leading toe corresponding to your middle finger; and a little toe, which, like your little finger, is *physically smaller* than the other three digits, and is on the *outside* of the paw (Figure 9).

 Depending on the softness or hardness of the ground, the robust fleshy middle pad appears blunt and flat-topped or bi-lobed like an "m." (The middle pad is often mistakenly called "heel pad.") Three relatively even lobes align along the bottom of the middle pad impression, which measures 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ " – 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (see page 9). The middle pad is the dominant feature of the track – the opposite of all canines, whose middle pad is smaller (Figure 19).

 In contrast to the symmetrical tracks of all canids, you cannot draw an "X" through a panther track due to cats' asymmetrical toe arrangement and middle pad's blunt or bi-lobed front edge (see Figure 19 for comparison).

 Typically, claw impressions are not seen in panther tracks. Panthers' retractable claws are kept sheathed within fleshy pockets positioned above the toes. On rare occasions, claw marks will show in a track if the animal is running, jumping or negotiating a slippery surface. They appear in front of the toe impression as tiny sharp holes or slits.

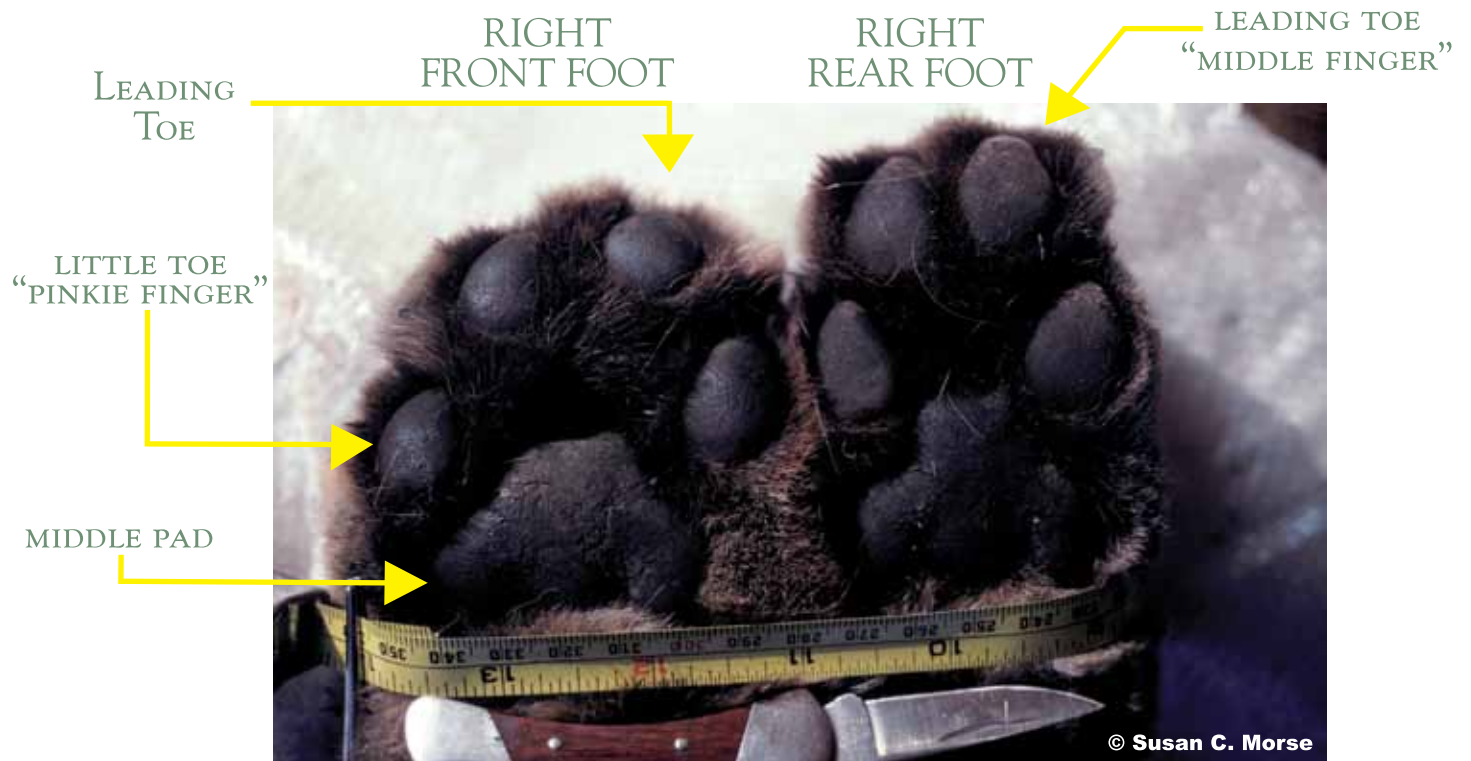


Figure 9. Puma front and rear feet illustrate the features that are characteristic of feline tracks.



Figure 10. The puma's left front foot has five toes, but only four register in the track. One is high on the foot and is not visible in this photo. A hind foot has four toes. Usually the front foot's track will appear larger, broader and more asymmetrical than the hind foot track.



Figure 11. Florida panther tracks, right feet.

Figure 12. Florida panther track. Note that some tracks (like this one) will not show the asymmetrical toe arrangement of the "middle finger" toe leading and the "little toe" trailing because the hind foot stepped directly into the front foot track impression and slightly altered its original appearance. Look at lots of tracks in order to gather the most accurate information.



COMPARISON OF PANTHER AND BOBCAT TRACKS

A bobcat's (*Lynx rufus*) tracks resemble a panther's, but they are much smaller (Figure 16). Not even a panther kitten old enough to walk with its mother has a track as small as a bobcat's; there is no size overlap. A panther kitten small enough to leave a bobcat-sized track is an infant and will be carried in its mother's mouth instead (Figure 13).



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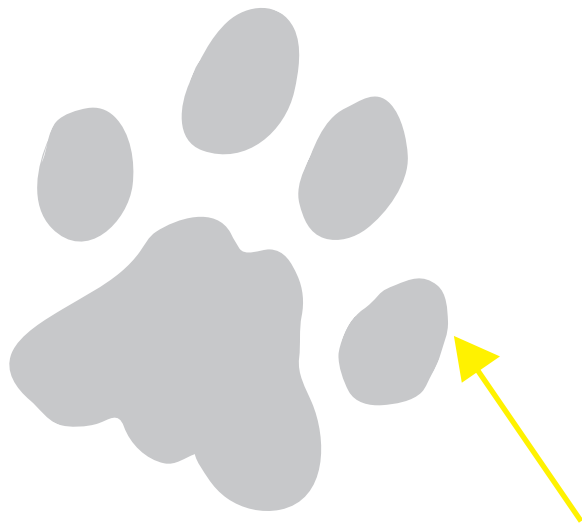
Figure 13. A mother puma carries her infant kitten in her mouth.



Figure 14. Bobcat right front foot. Note the presence of all physical features found in panther tracks.

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The condition of the tracking substrate (soft mud, clay, sand or hard-packed gravel road) can dramatically influence your measurements and will often exaggerate the size of an animal's track (Figure 15). Check multiple tracks in a variety of terrain, then closely examine an average-sized track and look for the right physical characteristics and appropriate measurement ranges to accurately identify your animal. For example, if it is a bobcat the overall track impression will be the size of a golf ball, in contrast to the tennis ball- or baseball-sized impressions of large female or male panthers. Bobcat toe pads are teardrop-shaped and pea- to bean-sized; panthers' teardrop-shaped toe impressions are penny- to quarter-sized, depending on the sex and size of the panther and on the substrate in which the track was made. Bobcat middle pads range from 1" – 1 ¼" wide; adult panthers range from 1 ¾" – 2 ½" wide (Figure 14 and Figure 16). Study the following information in order to appreciate how other measurements will allow you to further differentiate between panther and other species.



Right foot track. Note little toe is on the outside of the track.

Figure 15. Bobcat track next to turkey track.



Figure 16.
Relative sizes
of feline tracks:
It is helpful
when examining
a potential panther
track to recall the
relative sizes of the
other cats whose
tracks can be
found in Florida.

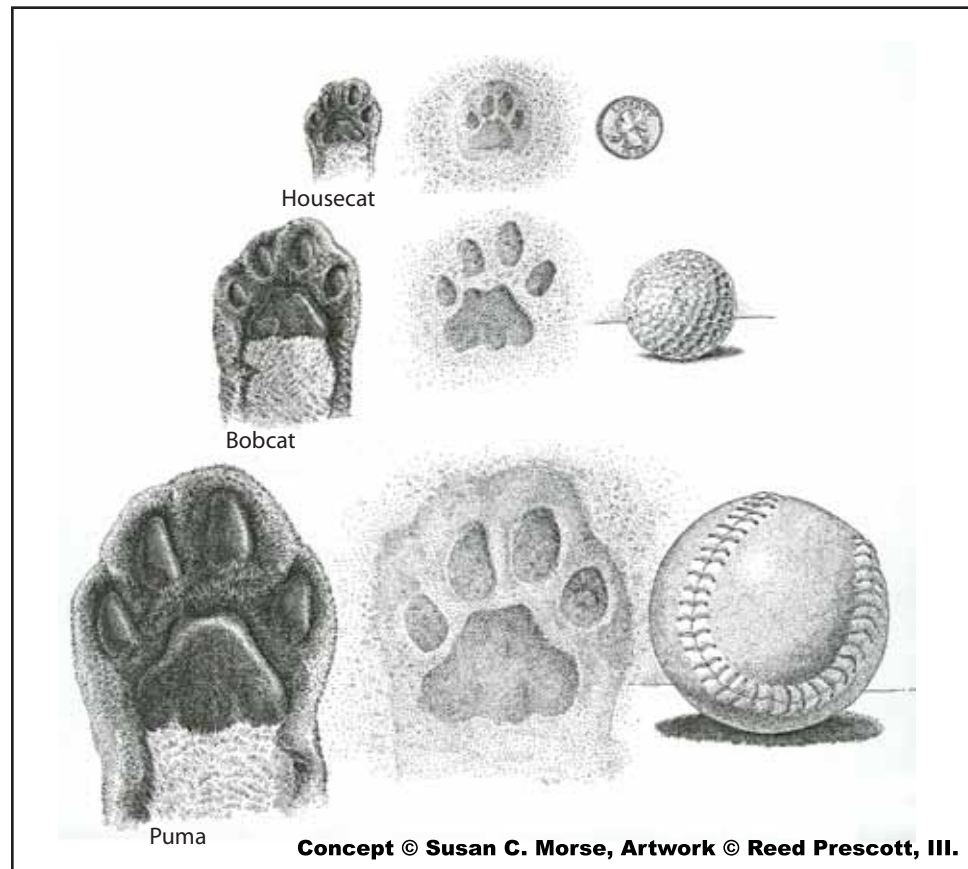


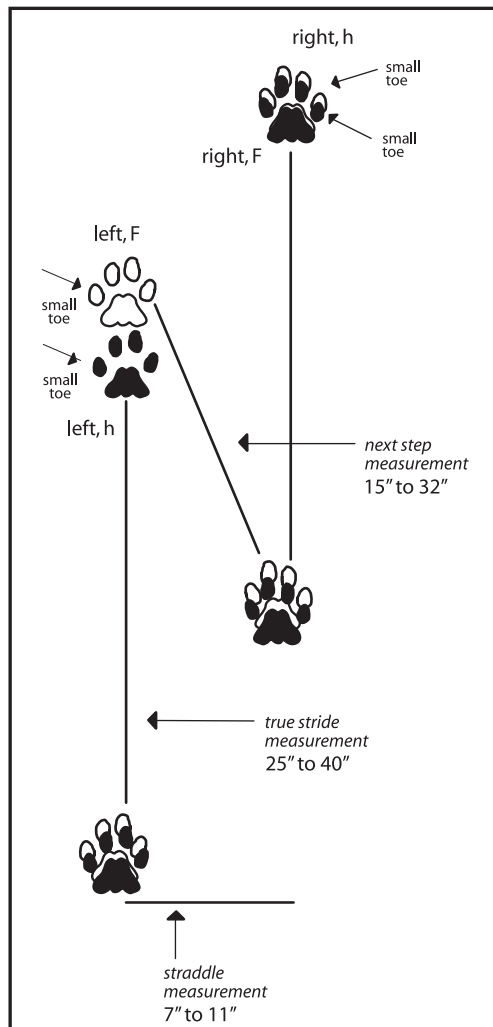
Figure 17. Many people
see Florida's more
common native cat, the
bobcat, and
mistake it for a panther.



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FLORIDA PANTHER TRACKING MEASUREMENTS

Figure 18. If a panther is moving slowly, the hind foot impression will register behind the front foot. Normal walking usually appears as a direct registered or double registered track. A faster-walking panther will leave tracks with hind foot impressions in front of the forefoot impressions.



🐾 Middle pad width	1 ¾" – 2 ½"
🐾 Track height (not including claw impression)	3" – 3 ¾"
🐾 Overall track width	2" – 3 ¼"
🐾 True stride measurement	25" – 40"
🐾 Next step measurement	15" – 32"
🐾 Straddle width (depending on speed and gait)	7" – 11"

(Figure 18)

CANID TRACKS (including coyotes, foxes and dogs)

- 🐾 In canids, four large toes are symmetrically arranged in paired forward and rear toes. Most often the blunt nail impressions register; however, sometimes they do not. All toes are roughly the same size and they dominate the track, appearing collectively larger than the middle pad impression.
- 🐾 The inside edges of the two rear toes come to a point (Figure 22). Panther toes are teardrop shaped.
- 🐾 You can readily trace an "X" through this symmetrical arrangement of toe and middle pad impressions of fox, dog and coyote (Figure 19). This feature often persists in old tracks even after other clues disappear. Red fox toes and middle pads are much smaller than those of a coyote or dog and are largely obscured by abundant foot fur (Figure 20). The red fox is probably not native to Florida.
- 🐾 A canid's middle pad impression is pointed, like the *pointed* face of a dog.
- 🐾 The bottom edge of the middle pad appears as an uneven chevron-shaped arrangement of two thinner, lower, outer lobes, encircling a more robust center lobe situated higher on the track.
- 🐾 Thicker, blunt nail impressions of canids usually appear in their tracks, typically extending directly forward from the toe impressions. Gray fox nails appear more catlike, delicately inserting pin prick holes in front of the toe prints. Be aware that dogs, wild or domestic, with worn nails or thick callused pads sometimes leave tracks with no nail marks (Figure 21).

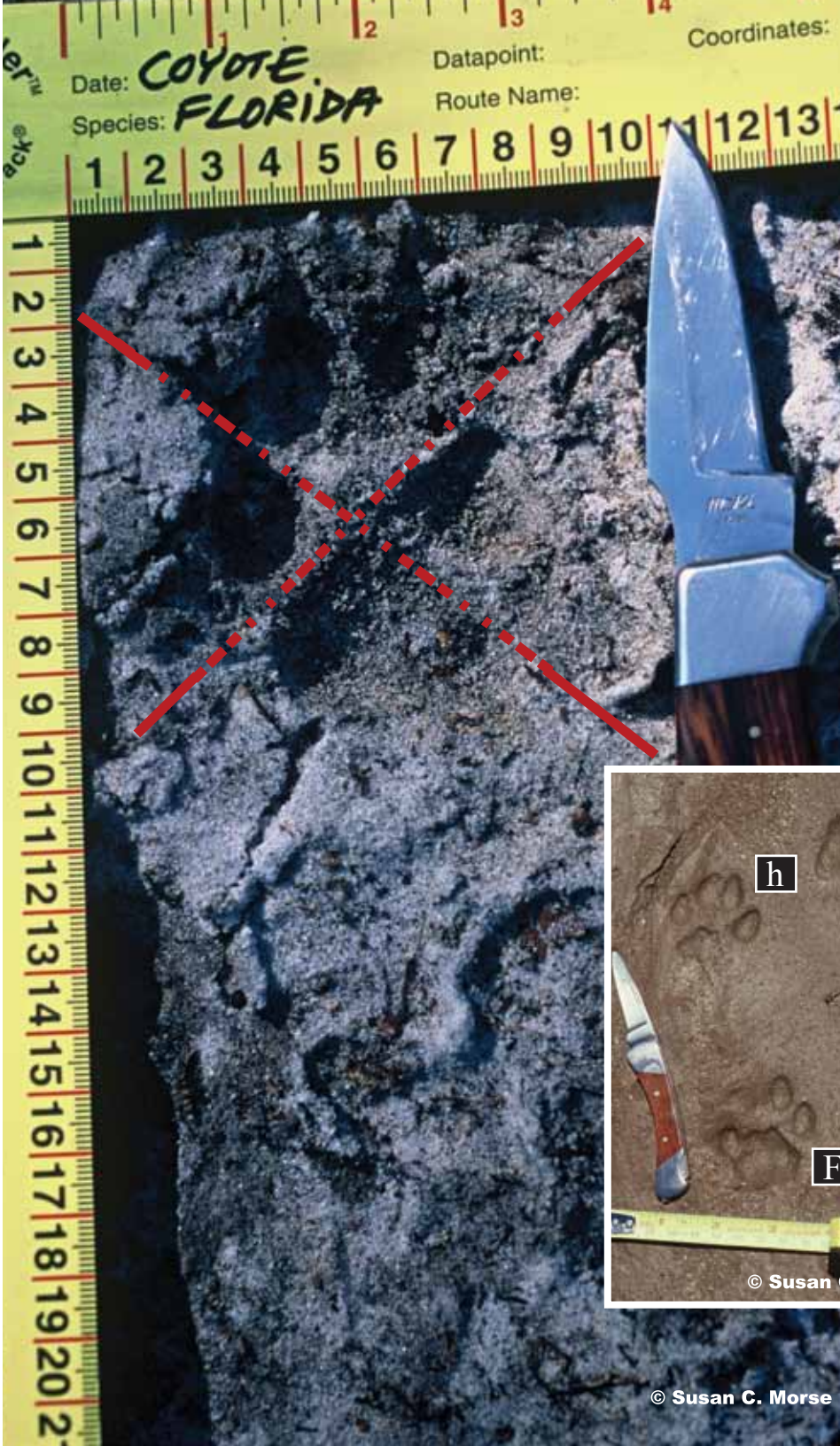


Figure 19. Coyote track.
Note the symmetrical arrangement of forward and rear toes, the pointed middle pad and the X that can be drawn through the track.

Figure 20. Red fox toes and pads leave much smaller impressions than coyote and dog feet. They will appear muffled with abundant foot fur.



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Figure 21. Bobcat left front and hind tracks are on the left, gray fox tracks are on the upper right.

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Figure 22. Female panther tracks to the left, dog tracks to the right. Note the "X" and distinctive claw marks in the dog tracks. Inside edge of rear toes come to a point.



Squared off edge.
Rear toes come to a point

© Darrell Land, FWC

BEAR TRACKS

The Florida black bear (*Ursus americanus floridanus*), a unique subspecies of the American black bear, is found in scattered populations around the state, including within the panther's range. Occasionally a bear front foot track impression may fool you into thinking you've found a "huge panther track," but panther tracks are small by comparison. Measure the middle pad carefully; if it's 1 ¾" to 2 ½" wide, it identifies a panther. Furthermore, each bear track should register all five toes at some point (unlike panther tracks). Middle pad impressions of bear feet are broad and not at all shaped like the tri-lobed panther pad. Note that the bear has a *big toe* on the *outside* of its paw (Figure 23) granting increased stability to this heavy-bodied animal. A panther's track shows the *little toe* on the *outside* - corresponding to a human hand's little finger (Figure 9).

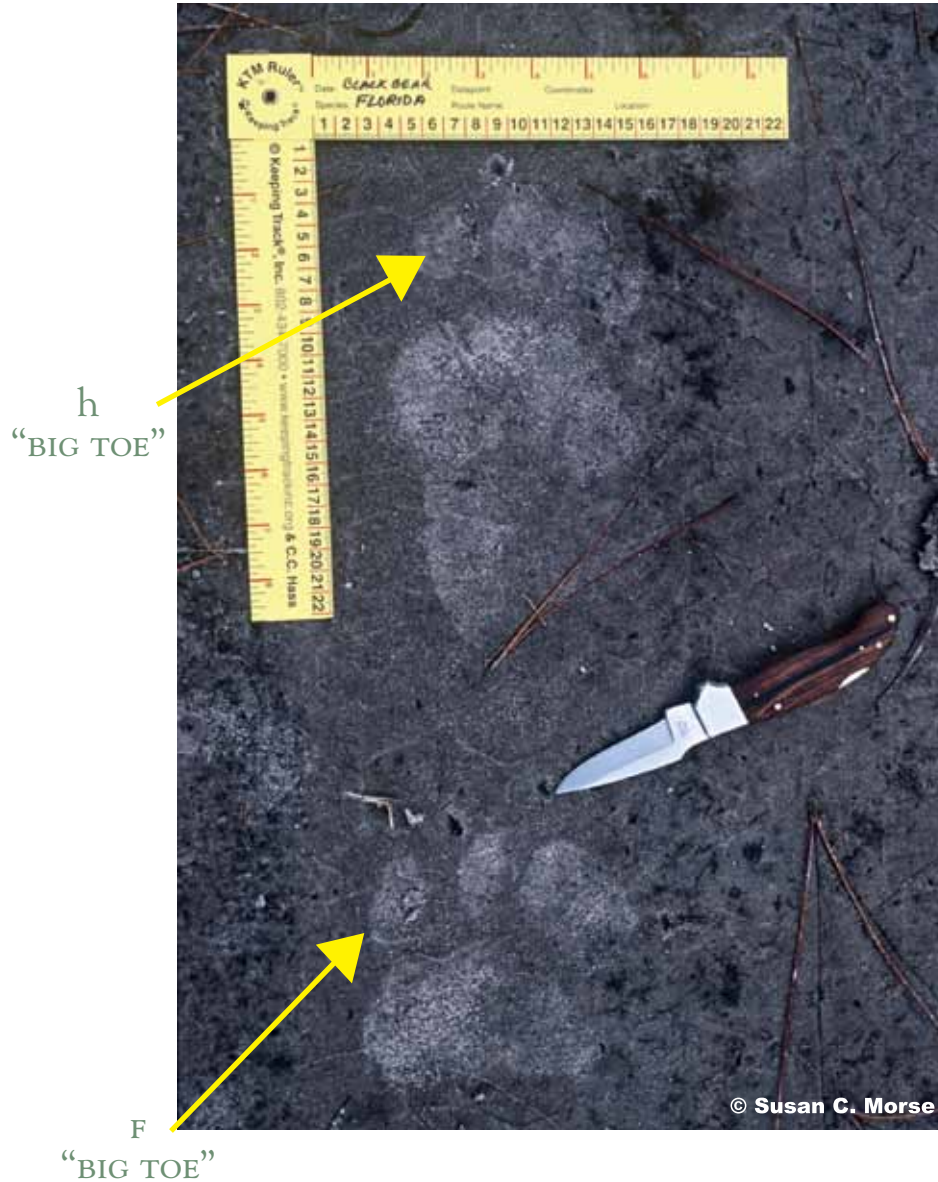
FRONT RIGHT FOOT



"BIG TOE"
ON OUTSIDE

Figure 23. Florida black bear front right track. One can sometimes add a little water to enhance the features of a track that appears obscure.

Figure 24. Florida black bear tracks. Note that the “big toe” is on the outside of both tracks indicating that you are looking at left feet. The knife is pointing at nail impressions. Test yourself: seek to understand why the front track cannot possibly be a panther track.



LEFT REAR
“BIG TOE”
ON OUTSIDE

LEFT FRONT



Figure 25. The Florida black bear inhabits wild areas in south Florida along with the panther. Bears and panthers seek cover in saw palmetto and other understory vegetation.

Figure 26. Reported sightings of Florida panthers are often of large animals at night. As a result, Florida panthers have even been confused with black bears.





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Figure 27. Panther scats are most often segmented with round or blunt-ended sections. One can carefully inspect the droppings for the bones and hair of prey species. Handling a scat without gloves can infect one with hookworms!

PANTHER SCAT

Depending on the prey or specific prey portions eaten, a panther's scat (fecal matter) may appear as a soft, blackish cord of pure meat or organ meat waste material 1 ¼" to 1 ½" thick. It may have no obvious identifiable remains in it. If the diet includes more prey hair and bones, the cords become more constricted and may be broken into blunt or round-ended segments (Figure 27). Panther scats sometimes are conspicuously placed on top of a scrape for added olfactory (scent-marking) information (Figures 28 and 29). Deer, hog or raccoon hair may be recognizable in panther scat. Old scats, which originally consisted of meat waste products, will turn whitish gray as they dry out and age.

SCENT MARKING

Scent marking involves an animal's deposition of chemical signals throughout the habitat. Animals scent mark with urine, feces, glandular secretions, saliva and other bodily substances. It is not only olfactory but also visual, enabling wide-ranging, potentially competing members of species like panthers to position themselves temporally and spatially within their habitat. The advantages are twofold: marking transmits scent messages to other panthers, facilitating mutual avoidance and preventing unwanted encounters and fighting. Marking odorants are also a vital "bulletin board" for panthers, announcing their social and reproductive status to potential breeding partners. Unlike bobcats and house cats, pumas (panthers) are not known to spray urine as part of their scent-marking repertoire.

A *scratch* or *scrape* is the most frequently found panther scent-marking sign (Figures 28 and 29). The panther's hind feet push back dirt, pine needles, and other soft materials into a slight mound, upon which the animal sometimes urinates and/or defecates. The most consistent scent messages found within the scrape are odorants deposited from interdigital glands that are located between the toes of a panther's foot. A shallow, rectangular trough 8 to 12 inches wide ends in a small pile; this constitutes long-lasting and ubiquitous sign of panthers wherever they are in residence. Look for scrapes/scratches under big pine trees, at intersections of trails or all-terrain vehicle roads, or along the edge of an ecotone (transition area between two adjacent plant community or habitat types). A pungent tomcat odor can sometimes be detected on a fresh scrape.

Figure 28.
Florida panther
scrape.



© Mark Lotz, FWC

Figure 29.
Puma scrape
made in
absorbent
pine needles.



© Susan C. Morse

CLAW RAKING

Claw raking trees and logs by panthers does occur; however, this sign is often very subtle and can only be reliably documented in conjunction with other irrefutable sign: e.g. tracks, a den site or a cached prey animal. Biologists researching Florida panthers note that claw raking on horizontal logs, especially fallen cabbage palm, is much more commonly detected than panther raking on standing trees (Figure 33). Unlike black bear scent marking on trees (Figure 30), panther claw scratches are most often repeated, with *two areas* of

scratching evident—corresponding to the grasping panther’s forearms and paws working the log or tree trunk in unison (Figures 31 and 32). Bear “mark trees” show evidence of the bear’s thicker claw scars, corresponding to their blunter nails. Florida bear marking sign is often accompanied by bite marks and black hairs left behind, as the bear rubbed its body on the marked surface.



Figure 30. Florida black bear scent-marking sign on a sabal palm, otherwise known as cabbage palm.



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Figure 31. Claw raking of logs and trees shreds the object being “marked,” making it visually conspicuous. The “message” is conveyed through secretions from glands between the toes that are absorbed by the frayed wood.



Figure 32.
Puma scent
marking a tree.

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Figure 34. Puma claw
raking sign on a tree.
Notice sharper, finer
scratches indicative
of a feline's sharper,
finer claw structures.



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Figure 33.
Sign of Florida panther
claw raking is
apparent on
this log.



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PREY REMAINS

Extreme caution should be used when examining a prey cache (hidden prey remains). The owner of the cache might be watching from nearby cover and seek to defend this hard-won meal.

Investigators should not inspect remains unless in the company of a wildlife agency official (e.g. Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service). A preliminary examination using binoculars from a safe distance may reveal some clues.

After feeding, the panther caches its prey animal intact (Figures 35 and 36). Coyotes and bears will sooner or later tear the carcass apart while feeding. Canids cache their prey in pieces, whereas panthers feed upon and bury the entire carcass in one place. Also, panthers may use their incisors to shear hair from their prey, thus the prey animal's hair will be found neatly clipped in regular sized "hair hanks" (Figure 37). Dirt, leaves, pine needles and hair hanks are visible on and around the cached prey. Although bobcats are also known to kill and cache deer (especially in northern habitats), it is difficult to drag their heavy prey to conceal it under dense cover. In the company of qualified researchers, you



Figure 35. Puma caching its deer prey.

Figure 36. Flattened vegetation next to the carcass may show the relatively relaxed demeanor of a panther feeding.



Figure 37. "Hair hanks" are not plucked from the hide as biologists previously thought. Instead, hanks are cut and will roughly correspond to the width of the panther's incisor teeth.



may determine the predator's identity by measuring the width of prey hair hanks, the canine tooth diameter and dental spacing of the predator's bite and by examining the style of kill. Panthers will most often kill deer-sized prey with a killing bite to the throat or nape of the neck. Other carnivores' kills often exhibit multiple bite wounds to the face and rump area. Another thing to look for is the appearance of the prey animal. If its legs are extended, it was most likely killed by a predator. If the victim's legs are positioned beneath itself, then the animal most likely died in a bedded position, possibly of a mortal injury, extreme parasitism, malnutrition or disease. Often predators get blamed for killing such animals when in reality they only scavenged the remains of an already deceased animal.

Canid-killed prey are sometimes covered with hair hanks; however, the clumps of clipped hair are irregular and variable in size. The hanks are often attached to pieces of hide that were torn off while the prey's meat was exposed and consumed. Remember, most wild canids are social animals that rarely eat alone; they are apt to be extremely competitive and aggressive with each other. Fighting over the right to eat invariably results in torn-apart prey, with pieces scattered about, and disturbed surroundings.

CAUTION: ALWAYS BE EXTREMELY CAREFUL NOT TO HARM OR CHANGE THE TRACKS OR SIGN AS THIS WILL DESTROY THE USEFULNESS OF THE EVIDENCE

EFFECTIVE TOOLS AND FIELD PRACTICES FOR RECORDING SIGHTINGS AND PRESERVING SIGN

- 🐾 Whenever possible, tracks and sign should be photographed next to a ruler, such as the Keeping Track® KTM ruler that can be opened at right angles to illustrate the length and width of the subject being photographed. A digital camera is recommended so you can immediately check the quality of your photo documentation. **Take multiple photos of multiple tracks and sign if possible; this increases your chance of a positive identification.**
- 🐾 After taking several photos, you may make a plaster cast of the track. We recommend placing a frame around the track so that the track environment can be cast with a thicker plaster bed that will be more durable.
- 🐾 Collect any feces found at the site. Feces may be stored in a paper or plastic bag for a few hours or frozen in a plastic bag. The material should be turned in to authorities as soon as possible to preserve its value as evidence.
- 🐾 Preserving the tracks or sign for inspection by a wildlife expert or to be photographed is also a valuable option. Simply placing a heavy waterproof box or bucket with a weight on top protects a track or scat from the elements.
- 🐾 If you discover the remains of a long-deceased panther, look for the possible characteristic shape of the skull. The nasal arch region is somewhat enlarged. If the panther was killed by another panther evidence of bite wounds on the skull may be observed (Figure 38). Contact the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and send pictures.
- 🐾 It is best if all observers present agree on how to describe and document tracks or sign, as well as identifying the entire site location before recording information. Consensus among all participants allows for a more objective investigation to proceed. Practice scientific rigor in the field; the evidence at hand should solidly support your report.

REPORTING SIGHTINGS


If you would like information on verifying or reporting panther sightings, call Defenders of Wildlife at 727-823-3888. To report an injured or dead panther (such as an animal hit by a vehicle) contact the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission at 1-888-404-3922 or #FWC or *FWC on cell. Text to: TIP@myfwc.com


Figure 38. Panther males sometimes kill other panthers in fights over territory, a natural phenomenon that may increase as the cats seek out habitat in Florida's diminishing wild lands. Note how the teeth of one skull fit into the bite wounds of the victim's skull.





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IF YOU LIVE IN OR VISIT PANTHER COUNTRY...


 **Be alert from dusk until dawn (and whenever deer are active).** Florida panthers are primarily active at night. Be aware of your surroundings and supervise children when outdoors in panther habitat.


 **Keep panther prey away.** Deer, raccoons, rabbits, armadillos and feral hogs are prey for the Florida panther. By feeding deer or other wildlife, people inadvertently may attract panthers. Do not leave potential wildlife food outside, such as unsecured garbage or pet food. Consider fencing fruit and vegetable gardens.


 **Keep pets safe.** Free-roaming, tethered or unfenced pets are easy prey for predators, including panthers. It is also illegal to let pets roam in Collier, Lee and many other counties. Bring pets inside or keep them in a secure, enclosed kennel at night. Feeding pets outside can attract raccoons and other panther prey; do not leave uneaten pet food available to wildlife.

 **Keep domestic livestock secure.** Place chickens, goats, sheep, hogs or other livestock in enclosed structures at night. Plans for building predator-proof enclosures for pets or livestock are available at www.mountainlion.org in the publications section. Electric fencing can be an effective predator deterrent. Defenders of Wildlife provides advice and assistance for the building of enclosures and other deterrents.

 **Landscape for safety.** Remove dense or low-lying vegetation that provides hiding places for panthers and other predators near your house. Choose plants that do not attract deer or other panther prey. For information on plants that deer do not like to eat, visit <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/UW137>. Appropriate fencing will make your yard or play area uninviting to prey animals such as deer.

 **Consider other deterrents.** Outdoor lighting, motion sensors and electric fencing may deter prey animals and panthers from entering your yard and make approaching prey and panthers more visible to you.

 **Drive safely.** Obey speed limits and reduce your speed in wildlife areas. Be extra alert during dawn, dusk and at night.

 **Don't litter.** Human food attracts wildlife and litter thrown from a car attracts wildlife to roadsides.

Additional information available at:

- **Defenders of Wildlife** www.defenders.org
- **Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission** www.myfwc.com/panther/
- **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service South Florida Ecological Services Office** www.fws.gov/verobeach
- **Keeping Track** www.keepingtrack.org
- **Mountain Lion Foundation** www.mountainlion.org

HELP PROTECT THE FLORIDA PANTHER

-  Learn more about the Florida panther at www.defenders.org. Share information with family, friends and neighbors.
-  Support efforts to protect Florida's natural areas through public land acquisition, private land conservation easements and sound land management that conserves and restores natural systems. <http://floridaforevercoalition.org>.
-  Get involved in road and highway planning affecting your community. Call Defenders of Wildlife at 727-823-3888 to obtain a copy of "The Conservation-Minded Citizen's Guide to Transportation Planning."
-  Support endangered species programs and laws, such as the federal Endangered Species Act, that save and recover species at risk and the habitat they depend upon. Visit www.saveesa.org.
-  Order a "Protect the Panther" or "Conserve Wildlife" license plate for your car. A portion of the proceeds from these plates goes to panther research and other wildlife conservation efforts. See www.myfwc.com/panther.
-  Want to help the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission monitor panthers? Share your panther photos at myfwc.com/panthersightings.
-  Join Defenders of Wildlife at www.defenders.org. Sign up for Wildlife eNews at <http://action.defenders.org>.

ABOUT DEFENDERS OF WILDLIFE

Defenders of Wildlife is a national, nonprofit membership organization dedicated to the protection of all native wild animals and plants in their natural communities.



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