



**Common Name:** Florida panther

**Scientific Name:** *Puma concolor coryi* – (Bangs, 1896)

**Other Commonly Used Names:** Panther, Cougar, Painter, Catamount

**Previously Used Names:** *Felis concolor coryi*, *Felis concolor floridana*, *Felis coryi*

**Family:** Felidae

**Rarity Ranks:** G5T1, SH

**State Legal Status:** Endangered

**Federal Legal Status:** Endangered

**Description:** The coat is pale brown to rusty above and dull white to buffy below, although melanistic (dark) forms have been reported. The Florida panther can sometimes be distinguished from other *P. concolor* by white flecking on the crown, nape, and along the midline of the back to between the shoulders. The flecking is likely induced by tick bites rather than a genetic characteristic, though *coryi* might be more sensitive to tick bites than other *P. concolor*. Other reported distinguishing characteristics include a cowlick on the shoulders and a crook in the tail. Adult males reach a total length of about 2.2 m (87 in), have a front foot pad width of 5-6 cm (2-2.3 in), and weigh 50-70 kg (110-150 lbs). Adult females measure about 1.98 m (75 in), have a front foot pad width of 4-5 cm (1.6-2 in), and weigh 30-45 kg (65-100 lbs). Kittens have dark spots until 9-12 months old. In comparison to the eastern cougar (*P. c. cougar*), the Florida panther is smaller and more brightly colored with smaller feet, longer legs, and a shorter tail.

**Similar Species:** The western cougar (*P. c. concolor*) looks very similar and individuals could escape from captivity and survive within the historical range of the Florida panther in Georgia. The eastern cougar (*P. c. cougar*), also very similar, is probably extirpated from the eastern U. S. There is some question as to whether these should be considered as separate subspecies or all lumped into *Felis concolor*. Reports of wild panthers or cougars in Georgia can almost always be attributed to misidentification of housecats, dogs, otters, and coyotes.

**Habitat:** In south Florida, the remnant panther population is restricted to several square miles of densely wooded swamps, hardwood hammocks, and pine flatwoods. Historically, this species likely occupied a variety of wooded habitats across the southeastern U. S.

**Diet:** Panthers consume a variety of mammalian prey, primarily whitetail deer, feral pigs, rabbits, raccoons, and nine-banded armadillos.

**Life History:** The home range of an adult male averages 51,900 ha (129,000 acres), and that of an adult female 19,300 ha (48,000 acres). Transient males and subadult females may cover even larger areas. The State of Florida is intensively studying and managing the remaining Florida panther population. Radio telemetry has been used to determine home ranges, habitat use, reproductive success, behavioral interactions, mortality factors, etc. Individuals are solitary; however, males will remain with females for about a week when breeding. Mating can occur at any time of the year, but peaks in late winter/spring. Under good conditions, females give birth to litters of 1-4 young every two years. After a 90- to 95-day gestation period, the kittens, which weigh about 500 g (1 lb), are born in a dense thicket. About two months later, they begin to accompany their mother on hunting trips. They become independent and disperse at about 18 months. Probably due to inbreeding as a result of the very small, isolated remaining population, male fertility, and thus reproductive success, is very low. Other health problems can also be attributed to inbreeding, and the resultant depressed genetic diversity contributes to lower long-term survivability. Historically, there was certainly some genetic exchange among subspecies where their ranges overlapped. Thus, in 1995 eight female cougars from Texas (*P. c. stanleyana*) were released into the Florida panther population. These Texas cougars have bred with *P. c. coryi* males and produced offspring which should help restore vigor to the population and reduce the problems associated with inbreeding.

**Survey Recommendations:** There are no recommendations at this time because there is no evidence of a resident population of panthers in Georgia. Compelling reports with evidence should be investigated and documented. Trail cameras and hair traps should be used in an attempt to gather additional evidence at these sites.

**Range:** Florida panthers are thought to have once ranged throughout the southeastern states from eastern Texas and western Louisiana and Arkansas through Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia to the Florida Everglades. This subspecies was probably found over almost the entire state of Georgia, possibly sharing extreme North Georgia with the eastern cougar. The Okefenokee Swamp was likely the last stronghold for this species in Georgia, where it was encountered fairly regularly until about 1920. The current population is restricted to about 1,254,600 ha (3.1 million acres) of habitat in the Big Cypress and Everglades regions of southern Florida

**Threats:** Loss of wilderness habitat through conversion to agriculture and development has been the major cause of decline throughout the historical range of the Florida panther. Another likely factor was the attempt to eradicate southern Florida's deer herds in the 1930s to control ticks, thus reducing the panthers' food supply. Panthers were also historically shot and trapped out of fear and disdain often directed towards large predators. Occasional illegal shooting probably continues, and panthers are killed regularly by collisions with traffic on the Everglades Parkway. Diseases, parasites, and several physiological problems, including heart defects, immune deficiencies, and reduced fertility that are probably a result of excessive inbreeding have apparently affected the remaining population, though these impacts are being mediated by the introduction of western genes. Chemical contamination is another factor contributing to the decline of panther health. Mercury poisoning claimed at least one panther in recent years, and pesticides and other toxic compounds have been linked to several health problems. Only 80-100 individuals are thought to survive in the wild, but this is approximately double the number that was estimated prior to the introduction of western genes into the population. Development pressures on remaining suitable habitat continue to be a problem.

**Georgia Conservation Status:** The resident population of panthers was apparently extirpated from Georgia early in the last century. However, the killing of a Florida panther in Troup County in 2008 potentially demonstrates that individuals from southern Florida can occasionally disperse into Georgia.

**Conservation and Management Recommendations:** It is almost a certainty that the Florida panther no longer occurs in Georgia as a resident. Prior to the cat that was killed in Troup County in 2008, the last documented records were of one that was killed, mounted, and displayed in Statesboro in 1903, and another that was killed in the southern part of the Okefenokee Swamp in 1925. More recent reliable cougar sightings were from a biologist who saw one on Berry College WMA in 1973 or 1974, a biologist who saw one on the Morgan-Green County line in 1977, and sightings on Moody Air Force Base in 1971 and 1974. However, these were most likely western cougars that were released or escaped from private ownership. Through a public survey, the Georgia DNR received 492 reports of panther sightings from July 1, 1978, through June 30, 1990. Investigations were completed on 410 of these. No conclusive physical evidence was found to indicate the presence of panthers. Most sightings can be attributed to misidentification of other animals such as house cats, dogs, coyotes, otters and bears. Any valid sightings are almost certainly of once-captive western cougars. Nineteen western cougars (*F.c.*

*stanleyana*), 11 females and 8 vasectomized males, were radio-collared and released at Pinhook Swamp in northern Florida in 1993-1994 to test the feasibility of attempting to restore Florida panthers to that portion of their historic range. The release site was chosen because of the large amount of public wild lands in the vicinity, the Osceola National Forest to the south and the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge to the north. Some of the cougars used habitat in South Georgia extensively. Individuals were documented to have ranged as far as Wilkes County, Turner County, and Stewart County in the eastern, central, and western parts of Georgia, respectively. The experiment proved that large cats could survive in northern Florida and South Georgia, but mortality was high due to shooting and highway collisions. All experimental cougars were recaptured in 1995. Many people remain opposed to the reintroduction of large predators such as panthers out of fear and out of concern about impacts on livestock and deer populations. Public support must be unanimous before a restoration project such as this can be successful. The intentional killing of the Troup County panther in 2008, and the subsequent lack of enforcement of laws that prohibit such activity, indicate that the public is under-informed regarding the conservation of this species. Conservation agencies and organizations need to increase efforts to ensure that valid information regarding panther biology and conservation is available. Georgia does not yet contain occupied panther habitat, but additional dispersals from Florida are certainly possible.

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### **Date of species account:**

J. Ozier, August, 2010: original account

M. Camp, October 2010: updated status and ranks, added pictures