



Plight of the Florida Panther

by Bill Lazarus

The panther was brown, lean and quiet, a large cat surrounded by children and not the least bit concerned. Hands reached timidly to pet it. It looked about with regal disinterest, casually glancing at curious faces as it stretched on a wooden board next to its open cage.

This panther had been brought to the 50th anniversary of the Depression-era project that created the Oleano campsite. It had been raised by humans and had no fear of the youngsters that crowded around it. It

did not attempt to shrug off its collar nor snarl at the hands that caressed its fur. Instead, acting completely opposite of a panther in the wild, it tamely accepted human direction.

Perhaps, in some small way, it understood. An animal known for living in complete isolation, of disappearing in swamps and forests and lurking in dark shadows, it was now forced to become a sideshow in a traveling circus. It had no choice. The alternative is the vast nothingness of time—

extinction.

The entire breed of animal known as the Florida Panther faces extinction. So, the most private of large cats, an animal more often heard than seen, has become the subject of license plates and been taken to exhibits in the hopes its appearance will help raise the money needed to buy open land for a refuge.

The largest predator in Florida and one of the largest on the entire North American

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continent, the panther is known for its distinctive voice, a fierce yowl that puts in the same family as the other vocal felines like lions and tigers. That sound is now virtually silenced.

"I see wild turkeys in my backyard," says Kathy Marsh, co-chairman of the Volusia-Flagler Sierra Club who lives in Ormond Beach, "and they are something. But if I saw a Florida Panther, I'd just fall over."

Her stability isn't threatened, although a panther was spotted a couple of years ago in northwest Volusia County. There are just too many problems restricting the animal's future.

In an essay on the panther, Lynn Wittmeier, president of a southwest Florida wildlife sanctuary, identifies four reasons behind the big cat's decline:

- Human population growth. "The great human appetite for developing Florida land undoubtedly is one of the greatest impacts to affect the Florida Panther population," she reports.
- Pollution and destruction of natural habitat. "That's a close second," she writes.

"To hunt they need land."

The dangers are multifold: pollution from incinerators, carbon monoxide from cars, pesticides, runoff from lawn fertilizers, dirty oil from boats dropped into the water, among other poisons. "Many of these acts go unseen except for the beings they destroy," Wittmeier adds.

• "Human greed and power . . . to control everything on our planet. That goes hand-in-hand with the first two points," she writes.

• Passage of laws mainly for "financial growth and special interest groups. Once various laws that control our environment are passed, all other factors of life are reduced to minimum quality and standards," Wittmeier writes. Unfortunately, she continues, "government standards are usually too low for our natural animal life to survive on its own."

The panther faces the biggest immediate threat. "I doubt it will make it," Sierra

Club's Marsh says. "I hope I'm wrong."

The big cats simply haven't been able to adjust to human intrusion into their lives. It's a cultural clash. Florida Panthers—so named by school children who voted on a name for the species—weigh from 70 to 200 pounds. They subsist on deer and small rodents, grabbing them by emerging from undergrowth in an explosive fury of flashing claws and a characteristic roar.

To hunt, they need land. The young move away from their parents and find

The Florida Panther once roamed across eight Southeastern states.

their own territory. The Florida Panther once roamed across eight Southeastern states. Human development has destroyed their habitat and spread them further apart.

That process has made it virtually impossible for panthers to meet and to mate. Those that stay within a shrinking area often mate within their own genetic family. According to Marsh, that shrivels the gene pool.

At last count, there are about 30 to 40 Florida Panthers left, according to Mercedes McCallen, an environmental educational instructor in Ormond Beach. Some 20 to 25 of them are wearing radio collars. Another 10 to 15 more have been introduced from Texas. Most live in southern Florida.

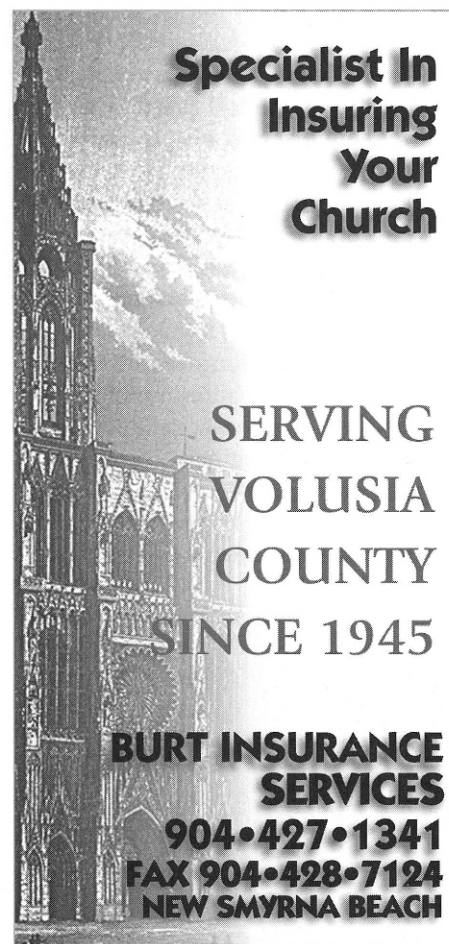
The only solution may be creating sanctuaries where the panthers can prowl and hunt in isolation and safety. That's where Wittmeier's group, Octagon Wildlife

Sanctuary, Rehabilitation, Learning Center and Conservancy, comes in. Located in Punta Gorda near Ft. Myers, the organization was founded about 19 years ago as a haven for sick, injured or endangered wild animals from around the world.

It houses wounded eagles, deer, tigers and monkeys, among other animals. The cover of its brochure features a handler feeding one of its about 40 panthers with a bottle. Those cats are not counted in the state total, Wittmeier says.

"Our organization in its small way tries to put right all the wrongs, so all mankind can benefit from a healthy world," she writes. "Our goal in taking all these unwanted [animals] is to have a diversified gene pool and help [return them to] their natural habitat in all corners of the world."

The goal is a lofty one, well beyond the reach of a single organization. But, for the Florida panther, it is the only option as this magnificent predator, now hunted by the specter of extinction, blindly pads slowly down a well-lit path to oblivion.



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The nonprofit agency, founded by County Council about 15 years ago, used to see 150 people a month. In 1996, the number jumped to 200 a month. Nooe doesn't expect to see the totals decline. Not after looking at FBI estimates: odds are 1 in 4 women will be raped in their lifetime; 1 in 7 males, usually children.

The odds go up around here during special events.

Statistics supplied by the Volusia County Sheriff's Department and Victim's Services show increases in incidences of rape during months containing SpeedWeeks, Bike Week, Black College Reunion, Spring Break and the beginning of school, compared with other months.

That shouldn't be surprising. "When you figure the influx of people coming into the area, 500,000 or more during event weeks, and add them to the usual number of crimes, you have to expect more rapes," says Det. Steven Lowery, a member of the Daytona Beach Shores' Public Safety Department and former president of the RCC Board of Directors. "The years when Spring Break was big here, rape was a big problem," he says. "Big crowds attract the criminal element."

As a result, he says, cities like the Shores routinely increase the number of officers in the streets during special events.

About half the victims are residents who, like Dana, become friendly with a seemingly nice visitor who turned vicious. Others are visitors who meet a resident and are later attacked. "The majority of cases involve acquaintances," says Det. Lowery, who does believe media provides adequate coverage of the assaults. "There are many predators who take advantage of the situation," adds Victim Service's Polzella.

Some events are worse than others. "We're busiest during Bike Week and Black College Reunion," says RCC's Nooe. "We usually don't have a problem during SpeedWeeks."

"Yes, we do," counters Polzella. "Typically, statistics (for rape) go up from SpeedWeeks through Spring Break. The population increases, crime goes up. When you add in alcohol, crime increases even more."

She doesn't blame the influx of people completely. The typically warmer weather highlighting the end of winter encourages people to be out more, to leave doors and windows open, to forget precautions.

Nor is there an increase in the crime rate every year. Polzella says sexual assaults during 1996 local special events did not increase as dramatically as usual.

The rape data is probably wrong anyway.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics' National Crime Victimization Survey only includes information on crimes against people 12 or older. "The youngest rape victim I ever saw was 11 weeks old," Nooe points out.

Moreover, if a victim were raped and murdered, only the more serious crime-homicide would count in the official statistics. In a January 8 article in the *Wall Street Journal*, authors John DiLulio Jr. and Anne Morrison Piehl estimated that actual crime figures may be as much as 25 percent higher than reported.

Some people may not even know they've been raped. Polzella says cases involving Rohypnol (roof-en-ol), the "date rape" drug that leaves its victims unable to react, have shot up. "It's inexpensive and easy to use," explains Det. Lowery. It's also manufactured in Mexico, pretty much beyond control of Federal regulators. The drug was developed for surgery to dull the nerves. When slipped into a drink, it renders a vic-

"We don't react the way we want to react"

tim unconscious, as though in a deep sleep.

Det. Lowery has only heard of a few Rohypnol cases locally. Polzella has seen many more. "Police have not yet begun to recognize the significant problem caused by the drug." During special events, she says, people are commonly out partying. A woman leaves her drink unattended to go dancing, and someone just drops in some of the drug.

"Some victims have a vague feeling something happened, but don't realize they've been raped until much later," says Polzella.

That's one reason why it may be difficult to know when the assault took place. Many victims will wait 6 months or a year to report an attack, if they go to the police at all. Police figures are based just on the people who file complaints. Dana, for example, did not file a report the evening she was attacked. Not many people do. A national study released in 1993 entitled *Rape in America*, found that 84 percent of rape victims do not report the attack at all. That automatically reduces the possibility of a news

story.

Many victims are afraid of the court process, Det. Lowery says. "They have a fear of publicity, too. They don't want other people to find out."

Some just want to tough the situation out and fail. "They think they can handle it alone, then realize they need counseling," Nooe says.

Dana was like that. Used to living by herself, she felt strong enough to rebuild her life. At first, she refused to believe it had happened. That's a typical response. "No one expects to be a rape victim," Nooe explains.

Moreover, Dana was confused. She had imagined such an attack and had convinced herself she would lash out in anger. She has broad shoulders and had played many sports in her youth. She and her friends would laugh about what she would do if a man tried to rape her.

When it actually happened, she simply went numb.

"We don't react the way we want to react," says Nooe, who has been counseling rape victims for about two decades. He started by talking to individuals involved in other situations and was assigned a rape victim as a client.

Nooe says rape victims aren't like other people. Most people who seek out counseling share similar characteristics. They can be identified almost immediately. Rape victims, however, represent all ages, educational backgrounds, racial groups and social levels. According to Polzella, an increased number of senior citizens have become victims recently.

Dana also began to doubt herself. Once a proud, determined woman, she seemed to withdraw, to ask questions about herself. As a teenager and into her 20s, she had been a heavy drinker but had stopped while her children were young. She began to drink again. Her work habits changed. Friends tried talking to her, but with little effect. Finally, unable to stop herself or to recover alone, she turned to counseling.

She is never late, getting out of her car slowly, checking around her, then hurrying into the building. She may need counseling for years, according to Nooe. At this stage, rape victims often go through the steps faced by people facing death: asking "why me," getting angry and lashing out, and finally, accepting the situation.

"We call it 'survivor to thriver,'" Nooe says.

Dana doesn't have a name for it. She hasn't really gotten past the first part of that formula yet. When she does, that will be her special event.

* Dana is not a real person.

