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Record number of panthers killed by vehicles in 2009

By LESLIE WILLIAMS HALE



A Florida panther was struck by a car and killed early Thursday morning, Dec. 17, 2009, on the Alligator Alley section of Interstate 75 near the Collier-Broward county line. The driver saw the panther at the last minute, but was traveling too fast to avoid hitting the endangered cat. (Photo from Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission)

COLLIER COUNTY — Florida panthers are closing out 2009 with an unfortunate distinction.

Just three days before the year ends, state wildlife officials announced that a 16th panther died in a vehicle collision — making this the deadliest year on record for panthers on the roadways.

The female panther was found dead Tuesday on State Road 29 just south of Interstate 75 on the northbound shoulder. That portion of roadway did not have any fencing, according to a notice from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

The panther, estimated at 4 years old, weighed 80 pounds, had no microchip, and no kinked tail or cowlick — both would have been signs of inbreeding. The carcass, which had been scavenged by other wildlife, will be stored for an eventual necropsy, but no definitive cause of death has been announced yet.

The death is also the third in Collier County in as many weeks, with a 15th panther found dead Dec. 23 after a vehicle collision 14 miles east of I-75 on Corkscrew Road, which brought panther roadkills to the same record set in 2007. That panther, a male, was estimated to be 3 years old and weighed 148 pounds, but did not have a tracking collar or microchip identification.

The week before, on Dec. 18, a 14th panther was found dead on I-75.

“Certainly, it is a sad milestone,” Ferraro said. “We did put out a news release last week to encourage folks to pay attention to those panther speed zones. We’re asking folks to slow down and obey the posted speed limit, and remember that this is an endangered species and there are only 100 left in the wild.”

In the past 20 years, the Florida panther population has been on the rebound from a low of 30 cats living in the wild.

“It’s a little bit bittersweet, because we are seeing more roadkills this year than ever before,” said Dave Onorato, a panther biologist with the FWC. “As the population size has increased, the number of roadkills has increased. If we weren’t losing 16 panthers a year to highway mortalities, panthers would be doing better. It’s still far from a healthy population.”

In all, 23 Florida panthers died in the wild so far this year. Three deaths were ruled the result of fights with other panthers, two causes of death remain unknown, one was shot in Big Cypress Mitigation Bank, and two deaths, including a vehicle death, remain under investigation. That one vehicle death is being investigated because officials determined the head of that panther had been removed after it died.

Earlier this month, a handful of groups filed a notice of intent to sue the federal government over protections for the endangered animal.

Two letters from a total of five groups filed petitions that give the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Interior Department 60 days to respond by designating 3 million acres in South Florida as critical panther habitat, or face a lawsuit. Similar letters, required as a formality by the Endangered Species Act, have been filed in the past by the groups: The Center for Biological Diversity, Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, the Estero-based Council of Civic Associations, the Conservancy of Southwest Florida and the Sierra Club.

Scientists cite habitat loss as a key threat to panther survival; panthers require a large swath of land for hunting and mating, and do not tolerate sharing that habitat with other panthers.

Collier’s panther speed zones are located on S.R. 29 and on U.S. 41 East, including a new zone posted last year through Collier-Seminole State Park.

In Lee County, panther speed zones are on Corkscrew Road, Daniels Road extension and Alico Road. Panther speed zone violations can carry fines exceeding \$200 for a first offense.