

Rare river crossing by female raises hopes for boost in Florida panther population

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Efforts to save the Florida panther may have broken through a longtime barrier: a female cat appears to have forged the Caloosahatchee River to stake out new territory to the north.

In a statement Monday, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission said the discovery was confirmed in November. It was the first time in 40 years that a female panther has crossed the river in Southwest Florida. If she mates with males who routinely cross the river, a new population could be added to the lone, crowded Florida population south of the river that in recent years has been dying in record numbers.

"This is a big deal for panther conservation," Kipp Frohlich, deputy division director for Habitat and Species Conservation, said in the statement. "An expansion of the panther's breeding range should improve the prospects for recovery."

A trail camera first snapped a picture of the female in 2015. The following summer, biologists set up additional cameras that collected more pictures, although the panther's gender was unclear, the statement said. Then in November, a biologist discovered female panther tracks near one of the cameras. Male tracks are larger than females, so staff believed that the tracks, which they preserved with a plaster cast, confirmed their findings.

"When we saw the tracks, we felt confident they were made by a female panther," Darrell Land, the commission's panther team leader, said in a

statement. "We could rule out a male panther because by the time males are old enough to leave their mother, their paws are already bigger than females' paws."

Panthers once roamed much of the state but their number had dwindled to just 46 by 1990 because of years of inbreeding. To revive the population, biologists released nine female Texas cougars, a close cousin. The plan worked, with numbers rising to between 100 and 180. But the increased number put pressure on territory - males, which roam a much bigger range, begin dying more frequently crossing roads, and more males began killing each other.

Part of the recovery plan called for a separate population north of the river to ease the pressure, but landowners resisted having females relocated. In 2015, the state proposed scaling back conservation efforts to eliminate the second population, which environmentalists fiercely opposed.

"We have been working with landowners to secure wildlife corridors to help panthers travel from south Florida, cross the river and reach this important panther habitat," said Larry Williams, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Florida supervisor. "While we do not know if this female used these tracts of land, we do know that securing lands that facilitate the natural expansion of the [panther](#) population are critical to achieving full recovery."

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