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FPNWR

Issue. #2

Friends of the
Florida Panther
National Wildlife Refuge

THE FLORIDA PANTHER PROWL

Quarterly Newsletter

El Morris & Kelly McAdams, Ph.D.





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THE FLORIDA PANTHER PROWL

By: El Morris & Kelly McAdams, Ph.D.

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WELCOME BACK!

“As we begin a new year, I want to express my deepest gratitude for your commitment to protecting Florida panthers and the irreplaceable habitat they call home. This past year brought meaningful progress—expanded community outreach, vital habitat stewardship, and continued support of research that helps panthers survive and thrive. None of it would have been possible without our volunteers, partners, and friends like you.

Together, we’re strengthening the future of the Refuge and ensuring Florida’s state animal has the wild places it needs for generations to come. Thank you for standing with us, believing in this mission, and being part of this community dedicated to keeping the wild Florida we love truly wild.”

Meredith Budd

President, Board of Directors
Friends of the Florida Panther Refuge

REFUGE NEWS

Hello again, friends! Ringing in the new year, the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge is pleased to present spectacular news for the upcoming quarter!

With the new administration building's construction coming along smoothly, the plan to open in early spring remains. In the meantime, the FPNWR team continues to recover from the 2025 six-week government shutdown, catching up on admin tasks and doing all they can to keep operations moving smoothly.

Luckily, to assist with said recovery, the FPNWR welcomes two new resident volunteers - Melody and Jerry Vanstrien! Recently retired from well-rounded careers - Melody as a public educator and Jerry a truck driver, the two have moved down from Michigan and are eager to begin this new chapter.

Their tasks involve trail and facility maintenance as well as assisting with outreach and education. The team is ecstatic to welcome them!

Beyond the FPNWR, the Ten-Thousand Islands Refuge is currently hosting their Waterfowl Hunt Season, open until the end of January. For further information and registration, please visit TTI's website:

<https://www.gov/refuge/ten-thousand-islands>

Finally, save the date! The Save the Panther Day Festival will be held at the refuge on Saturday, March 21st!

Come celebrate and support the Florida panthers we hold so dear with food, fun activities, and tours. Check back with us on Facebook in early March for information regarding times and registration for tours. We hope to see you there!

— WILDLIFE HIGHLIGHT —

Florida Manatee

The Florida Manatee (*Trichechus manatus latirostris*) is a subspecies of the West Indian Manatee, and Florida's only native dwelling manatee. They live in fresh, brackish, and marine coastal environments, with a habitat range spanning as far west as Texas and as north as Delaware in the warmer months. They grow typically to 9-10 feet in length, but have been known to reach over 13 feet. On average they weigh around 1,000 pounds, though large manatees can exceed 3,500 pounds.



Manatee Photographs by dachappel

The Florida Manatee's diet consists primarily of seagrasses. They have also been recorded eating water lettuce, mangrove leaves, and grasses from lawns that extend directly to the water's edge. Manatee calves can eat 10-15% of their body weight daily; a 500-pound calf will eat 50 to 75 pounds of vegetation every day. Adult manatees eat approximately 4-9% of their body weight daily, so a 1,000-pound adult will consume 40 to 90 pounds each day. Manatees have one stomach and extremely long intestines (approx. 150 ft.), and it takes 7 to 10 days for food to fully pass through their digestive tract.

Manatees are mammals, giving live birth to their calves. The female manatee, called a cow, tends to produce a single offspring – however, occasionally, they may birth twins.

Mature cows typically have their first calf between the ages of 7 and 9 years. Healthy, well-nourished females will give birth to a new calf about every 3 years.

— WILDLIFE HIGHLIGHT —

Florida Manatee

While the Florida Manatee is a massive creature, they have very little blubber and therefore cannot effectively maintain their body temperatures. Manatees cannot tolerate water below 68 degrees Fahrenheit. During the winter months, as much of the manatees' coastal waterways cool, the animals migrate to Florida's springs, where the water remains at a constant 72-74 degrees Fahrenheit. Manatees may also find winter respite in the waters near running power plants, more inland waterways, and in the southernmost coastal parts of Florida.

As manatee activity coincides more directly with human recreation, it is essential to remember the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) of 1972, which requires that we appreciate all marine mammals from a distance; the MMPA makes it illegal to touch, feed, or harass any marine mammal.

Though you may commonly see people offering manatees water from hoses, or lettuce from boats, it is both illegal and extremely dangerous to engage in such actions. Our water is unsafe for their consumption, and their presence in busy waterways puts them at great peril.

Manatees are naturally curious creatures. Should they approach you in the wild, allow them to inspect you as you do them, but never reach out to touch or feed them, and do not follow them when they swim away.

The primary threats to the Florida Manatee are blocked access to warmer waters, starvation, and boat strikes.



— WILDLIFE HIGHLIGHT —

Florida Manatee

What places manatees at risk of starvation is the increasing lack of seagrass in the wild, caused by human interaction. Boat anchors in seagrass beds often result in scars; seagrass grows slowly, taking years to reestablish itself.

Additionally, runoff from industries and private homes entering our waterways, containing phosphorus and nitrogen (often found in fertilizer, weed killers, or effluent from septic systems), may result in an overgrowth of algae that spans the water's surface and prevents light from reaching the seagrass.

Boat strikes are particularly deadly for manatees, regardless of the type of strike. Hull strikes cause blunt force trauma, and propeller strikes penetrate. A manatee's lungs are close to the surface of its back, meaning a propeller cut to the back can puncture the animal's lungs, an often fatal injury.

What **YOU** can do to help protect our Florida Manatees:

- Use eco-friendly fertilizers and weed killers. Here is one such recipe:

1 gallon white vinegar + 1 cup of salt + 1 Tbsp eco-safe dish liquid. Apply solution directly to weeds.

- Wear polarized sunglasses when out on the water.
- When boating, drive slowly to give manatees time to move out of the way. Obey Manatee Zone signage, and be aware of shallow waters and seagrass beds. Have a spotter aboard to help spot manatees that the captain may not see.
- Dispose of trash properly to avoid plastics and other such substances from entering the water. Marine debris, such as fishing line, rope, and netting, is a common threat to manatees.
- Add prop guards to your engines to reduce the likelihood of propeller cuts to manatees and to protect seagrass beds.

— WILDLIFE HIGHLIGHT —

Ghost Orchid

The Ghost Orchid (*Dendrophylax lindenii*) is an elusive, swamp-dwelling flowering plant native only to south Florida and western Cuba.

This extremely rare specimen is found high in trees, deep in swamps with high humidity and mild temperatures. Preferring hot and wet climates, blooms most commonly appear in the summer months. The orchid bloom is a white, delicate flower with an apple-like aroma. The plant is leafless, and the gentle petals trail down from its center, giving it the appearance of free-floating and reinforcing its mysterious reputation.

Given the baseline rarity and hard-to-access growing places of this plant, not much is currently known about its life cycle. Pollination of the orchid occurs only at night, and there exists little information regarding the pollinators themselves. Scientists suspect various moths of being primary pollinators for the orchid, namely species of Sphinx Moths.

Long has there existed lore surrounding this orchid: some claim it to be the soul of a lost lover, a mystical entity that either grants wishes or haunts the seeker, or a spiritual guide between our world and that of the spirits.

The most significant threats to the Ghost Orchid are of human origin. These include poaching, habitat degradation, and habitat loss.



Ghost Orchid Photographs by Mark Danaher

— WILDLIFE HIGHLIGHT —

Ghost Orchid

Due to the plant's unique environmental needs, its population is limited by the borders of the swamplands they thrive in. As industrial and commercial development continues within Florida, swamps and wetlands continue to shrink, thereby reducing the native homes where these orchids thrive.

Poaching is the most prevalent of the threats faced by the plant species, as the beauty of the bloom has for centuries been sought after in unsustainable ways. In June 2025, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposed placing the ghost orchid on the endangered species list, and the plant is currently listed as threatened.

What **YOU** can do to help protect the Ghost Orchid:

- Admire all wildlife from a distance, and take no biological matter from where it is found.
- Properly dispose of trash, so as to not negatively impact the trees on which the orchid grows.
- Recycle plastic bags, as they can get blown into the swamp's trees and damage or cover the orchids.
- Use environmentally friendly weed killer and fertilizer. Excessive runoff containing non-eco-friendly chemicals can seep into our wetlands and severely damage the plant life.



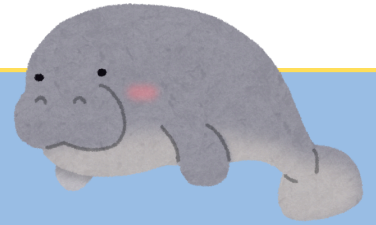


KELLY'S KITTEN CORNER



By Kelly McAdams, Ph.D., Friends Board Secretary,
VP of Conservation Education, Clearwater Marine Aquarium

Manatee Fun Facts!



- Their closest relative is the elephant
- All manatee hair is called vibrissae; they use these whiskers to navigate their environs
- They have toenails on their pectoral (front) flippers
- It is believed that many, many years ago, sailors often mistook manatees for mermaids
- They can hold their breath for up to 20 minutes
- For short bursts, they can swim up to 15-20 miles per hour
- They have “marching molars”; as their front teeth are worn down, more teeth grow in the back of their mouths and push all teeth forward as the front-most ones fall out

How do manatees send messages? Sea-mail!



Where do manatees sleep? On their water beds!

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Help the manatee find the seagrass!

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THE FLORIDA PANTHER PROWL

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Friends of the Florida Panther partners with the following
organizations and agencies:

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (**FWC**)

Defenders of Wildlife

Live Wildly

Conservation Collier

The National Wildlife Refuge Association

The Coalition of Refuge Friends and Associates (**COFRA**)

Friends of National Wildlife Refuges, Hatcheries, and Rookeries

We extend many thanks to them for all of the work they help us accomplish!

