

HOW TO RECOGNIZE PANTHER TRACKS^a

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Abstract: Experience in investigating panther (*Felis concolor coryi*) reports showed that most people, including wildlife biologists, cannot readily and accurately distinguish panther tracks from those of other species, particularly from large dogs. Characteristics by which to identify panther tracks are presented.

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The Florida Panther Record Clearinghouse, established in October 1976 at the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission's Wildlife Research Office, has received, categorized, and filed 752 panther reports from within Florida as of June 1978. When a report is received at the Clearinghouse that is "fresh" and in any way convincing, a special effort is made to find panther sign in the vicinity of the observation and the observer is interviewed. During these investigations it has become evident that most people (including wildlife biologists) cannot distinguish panther tracks, particularly from large dogs.

METHODS

To gain experience in recognizing panther tracks, another biologist and I spent a day at Robert Baudy's Rare Feline Breeding Compound near Center Hill, FL, making track casts from 5 captive panthers—1 adult male, 2 adult females, and 2 kittens. Later, a week was spent in west Texas with Roy McBride, a professional mountain lion (*F. c. stanleyana*) hunter, to observe lion sign in the wild. Since then, wild panther tracks have been found, measured, and documented with plaster casts in the Fakahatchee Strand, Big Cypress Swamp, and Everglades National Park in south Florida.

DISCUSSION

The characters that identify panther tracks, based on those tracks we have observed and measured in Florida, are the size and shape of the track as a whole, the absence of claw marks, and the size and shape of the heel pad (Fig. 1). The claws of panthers are encased in a sheath and do not show in a normal track. In adult panthers the heel pad may be from 50 to 70 mm on a fore foot and from 48 to 60 mm on a hind foot and show 3 lobes and 2 distinct indentions in the posterior margin. The track is asymmetrical with the second digit advanced. The widest digital pad is seldom more than 44% of the width of the heel pad. Tracks of the fore feet are broader than those of the hind feet.

Tracks made by large dogs are commonly mistaken for panther tracks in spite of the fact that they are not as broad as panther tracks, the heel pad is narrower and they lack the 2 indentions that occur in the hind margin of the panther's heel pad (Fig. 2). The track of a dog is fairly symmetrical with digits 2 and 3 being parallel and digits 1 and 4 being parallel. The width of the widest digital pad mark is usually more than 44% of the width of the heel pad. Dog tracks usually show blunt claw marks.

Bobcat tracks are also occasionally mistaken for panther tracks (Fig. 3). However, panther kittens, when they leave the den at 6 weeks of age and weigh 3 to 3-1/2 kg, have a hind pad track approximately 35 mm in width. The fore pad track of very few bobcats is wider than 30 mm (Grinnel, et al., Furbearing mammals of California, 1937). In addition, the tracks of small panther kittens are normally associated with those of their mother.

Imperfect tracks of small black bears (*Ursus americanus*) are sometimes mistaken for panther tracks (Fig. 4). However, the bear's toes are arranged in a line across the front

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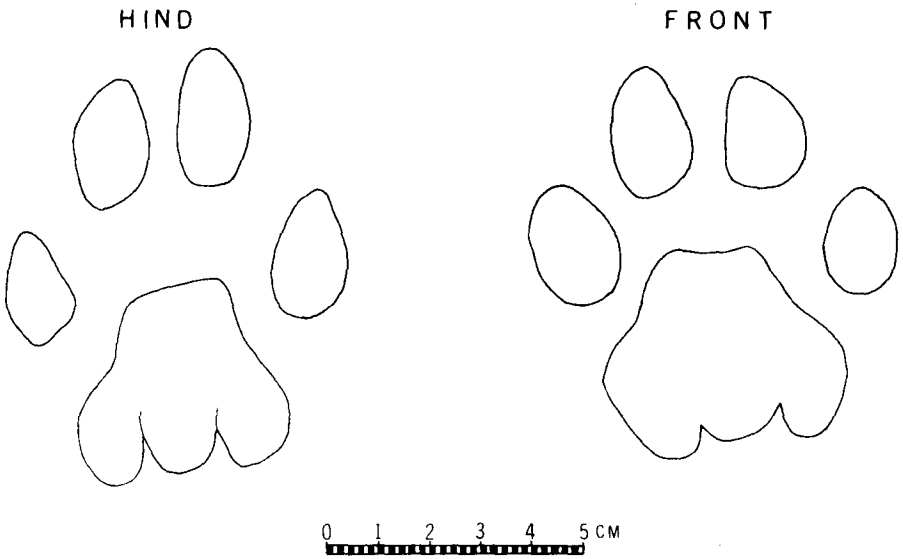


Fig. 1. Comparison of a left hind foot track with a right front foot track of a 44 kg sub-adult male panther from the Big Cypress Swamp, Dade County, Florida.

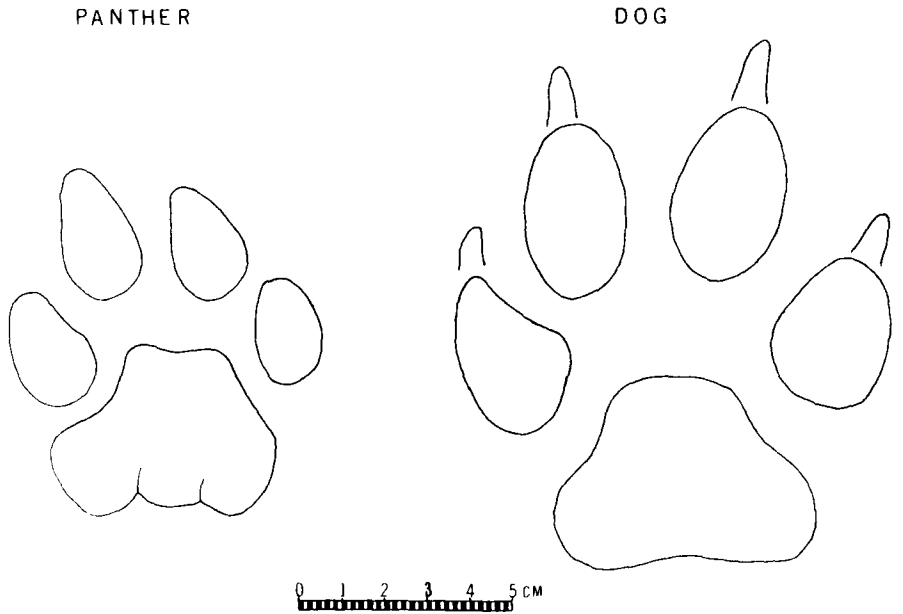


Fig. 2. Comparison of a right hind foot track of a captive male panther estimated to weigh 90 kg with a track of an average size German shepherd dog (weight unknown).

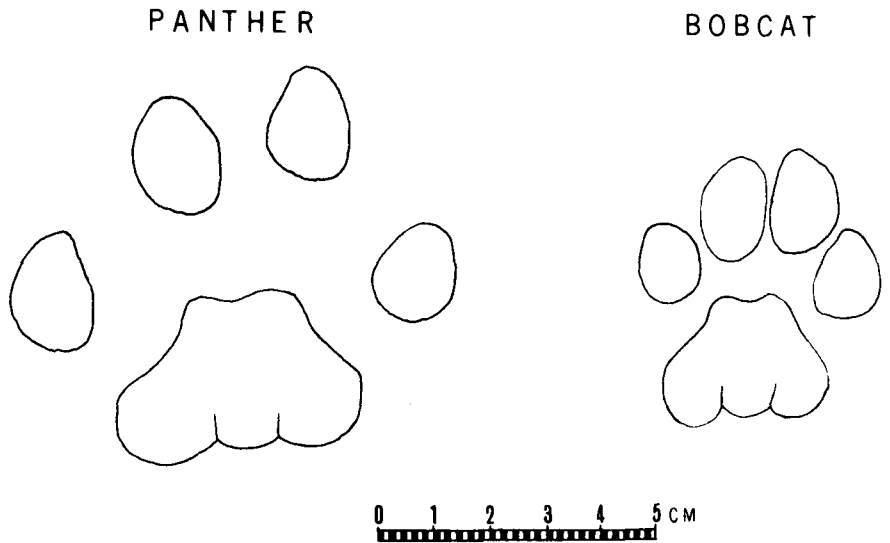


Fig. 3. Comparison of a right front foot track of a captive panther kitten which weighed 8 kg with the left hind foot of a wild bobcat (relatively large track).

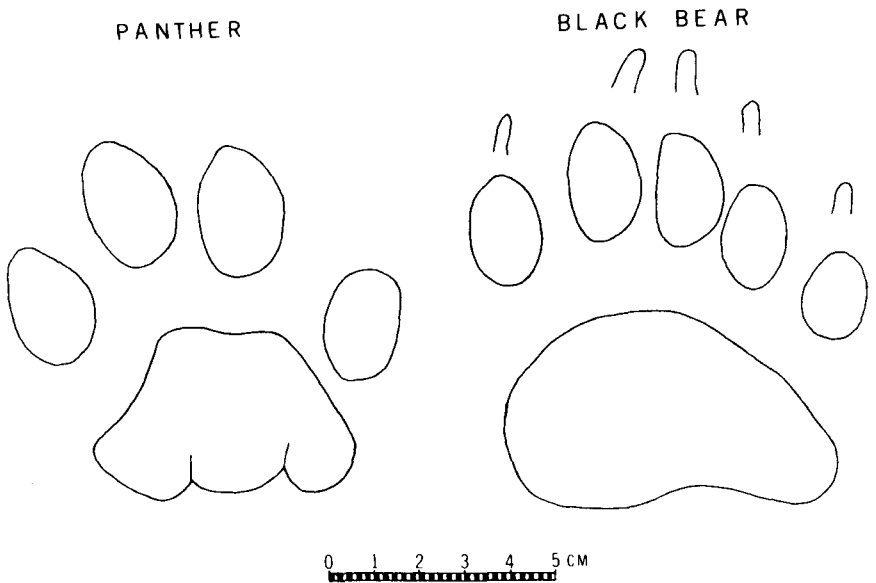


Fig. 4. Comparison of a right front foot track of a wild male panther (weight unknown) in the Fakahatchee Strand, Collier Co., Florida, with the right front foot track of a small black bear (weight unknown) also in the Fakahatchee Strand.

of the track and the heel pad of the hind foot is much longer than in the panther. Also, the heel pad of the front foot is almost as wide as the track itself.

Panthers leave distinctive tracks that can be identified. Persons who believe they have panthers in their area should search for sign, particularly tracks, and should document the evidence with casts or photographs. I would advise caution about reported observations offered without convincing evidence.