

ENTERTAINMENT

New book tracks the Florida panther

Susan L. Rife, Correspondent

Published 7:02 a.m. ET Oct. 3, 2020

Craig Pittman covered environmental issues for more than 20 years for the Tampa Bay Times, and every time he wrote a story about the vanishing Florida panther, he'd think it would make a great book.

"But I didn't have an ending," he said in a phone interview from his St. Petersburg home. "Finally about three or four years ago I got an ending. It's a hopeful ending. Not a happy ending, but a hopeful ending."

Pittman will discuss that book – "Cat Tale: The Wild, Weird Battle to Save the Florida Panther" (Hanover Square Press, \$27.99) – during a Zoom chat at 6 p.m. Thursday through Bookstore1Sarasota.

"Cat Tale" documents the plight of Florida's official state animal, the panther, that most elusive of wild Floridians. By the 1990s, the cats' population had shrunk to fewer than two dozen animals, their natural habitat destroyed by the rush of development in the Sunshine State. Their survival as a species was tenuous at best, following the North American trend of native big cats also called pumas, mountain lions or cougars depending on the region. They survive in just 16 western states, and east of the Mississippi, only in Florida – and just barely.

While panthers once roamed all over Florida, their habitat has disappeared under the onslaught of human population and development. The remaining population lives primarily in the Big Cypress Swamp, the Everglades and the Fakahatchee Strand, all in far south and southwest Florida.

"Throughout the panther's one-time habitat, the marshes have been filled in to make way for suburbs and strip shopping centers," Pittman writes. "The clumps of palmettos that provide a panther with shelter have been ripped out to make room for lawns and golf courses and college campuses and airport runways and mines. The trees that offer a high vantage spot have been felled, first for lumber, then to make way for highways packed with cars and trucks. All around them, there's so much noise from the humming air conditioners and rumbling vehicles that a panther can't even hear itself purr, whistle, mew, chirp, hiss or growl. Only one of its blood-curdling screams might cut through the din – but that would spoil its preference to pass unseen and undetected."

Like nearly all of Florida's 21 million residents, Pittman has never seen a panther in the wild. In fact, he's seen only three panthers altogether – a captive cat at an Everglades roadside menagerie, a dead animal on Interstate 4, and the taxidermied specimen that occupies a glass case at the Museum of Florida History in Tallahassee.

That stuffed panther is FP3, the third cat fitted with a radio tracking collar by Florida wildlife biologists in a program begun in the 1980s to help figure out the panthers' movements and habitat. The cat, a 70-pound female who died in an accident when biologists tranquilized it to change the batteries in the collar, is a scrawny specimen representing all that had gone wrong with the panthers over the course of the 20th century.

But wildlife experts for decades disagreed over what actions should be taken not just to protect the surviving animals, but to bring the species back from the teetering edge of extinction.

That's where Pittman's book gets really interesting. It's not just a team of panther specialists slogging through the Big Cypress Swamp in search of the elusive animals. It's good guys and bad guys, people working not simply in the interests of the cats but in service to politicians and developers, scientists questioning data and methodology. It's elected officials

who must represent conflicting interests. Developers who trade acreage here and there in service to environmental concerns.

Key to the story are several players, including Roy McBride, a Texas tracker, hunter and wildlife specialist who became central to the survival of the Florida panthers; a veterinarian named Melody Roelke who discovered that inbreeding was critically threatening the shrinking population; and David Maehr, who became known as “Mr. Panther” but whose methodology, personal style, manipulation of data and conflicts of interest ultimately cast him as a villain in Pittman’s book.

Maehr died in 2008, and Pittman pondered his portrayal in the book.

“There are people who think I’ve slandered him,” Pittman said, “because he was dead and couldn’t defend himself. I went above and beyond. I went through everything he wrote, talked to the people who worked with him more closely, went over emails he exchanged with wildlife people. I did my best to portray him as a man in full.”

Pittman, who was laid off from the Tampa Bay Times at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March, has published several other books, including “Oh, Florida! How America’s Weirdest State Influences the Rest of the Country” and “The Scent of Scandal: Greed, Betrayal, and the World’s Most Beautiful Orchid,” which involved Selby Botanical Gardens.

He hopes readers “will recognize just how hard it is to fix nature once you break it, how incredibly expensive and time consuming it is, even as charismatic an animal as the panther, the state animal. It’s easier to preserve something rather than try to fix something once it’s broke.”

And that hopeful ending? The remaining cats, strengthened genetically through the addition of some Texas pumas to the gene pool, have begun to move northward, swimming across the Caloosahatchee River and establishing themselves east of Punta Gorda, in the Babcock Ranch Preserve.

They’ve even had kittens.

Interested?

Craig Pittman will discuss his book “Cat Tale: The Wild, Weird Battle to Save the Florida Panther,” at 6 p.m. Friday through Bookstore1Sarasota. For more information: sarasotabooks.com