

# Earthtalk



## From the Editors of E/The Environmental Magazine

Fewer than 100 Florida Panthers are alive in the wild today, hanging on in the southern tip of Florida. The big cats were hunted to near extinction by the mid-1950s. Today, primary threats are habitat loss and fragmentation, driven by human population growth, which has tripled in Florida since the animals were declared endangered in 1967. Image by Monica R., courtesy Flickr.

*Dear EarthTalk: What's the story with the Florida Panther these days? Is it still teetering on the brink of extinction, or is it on the rebound?*

-- Alex T., via email

One of more than 20 subspecies of cougar and native to the southeastern United States, the Florida Panther is most certainly still highly endangered. Biologists estimate that less than 100 of the animals are alive in the wild today, hanging on in the southern tip of Florida below the Caloosahatchee River. Their current range represents less than five percent of where they originally roamed across Florida, Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and parts of Tennessee and South Carolina.

Perceived as a threat to humans, livestock and game animals, the Florida Panther was persecuted and hunted to near extinction by the mid-1950s. Today, primary threats are

habitat loss and fragmentation as a result of human development. According to Defenders of Wildlife, the main culprits in the decline of the animals' numbers are: urban sprawl; the conversion of once diversified agricultural lands into intensified industrial farming uses; and the loss of farmland to commercial development. Other factors include collisions with automobiles, territorial disputes with other panthers as habitat shrinks, and inbreeding resulting from their isolated population. Additional threats include mercury poisoning from the fallout of coal-fired power plants, parasites, and diseases such as feline leukemia and feline distemper.

Efforts to help the Florida Panther recover have had limited success. Many public agencies and nonprofit groups have worked together to try to bring back the panther—Florida's state animal—since it was first listed as endangered by the federal government back in 1967. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), panthers require large areas of contiguous habitat: Each breeding unit of one male and two to five females requires some 200 square miles of territory to thrive. Biologists report that a population of 240 panthers requires between 8,000 and 12,000 square miles of habitat and sufficient genetic diversity in order to avoid inbreeding as a result of small population size. The introduction of eight female cougars from a closely related Texas population in 1995 helped mitigate inbreeding problems, but most analysts fear that the effort was too little, too late for the threatened cats.

Since the animals were first listed as endangered, the human population of Florida has more than tripled, meaning that rescue efforts are swimming against the tide. Defenders of Wildlife reports that, since 2004, human-panther encounters have been on the

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# Curbside

## DODGE RAM 1500 RAMBOX

By Anthony Barthel

In last week's Ford F150 review I mentioned that it would take a lot for today's pickup truck buyer to consider a brand new vehicle if their present one was still doing its job. Well for all those pickup buyers who want a good reason to buy a new pickup truck, consider the 2009 Dodge Ram 1500.

Dodge, like Ford, has redesigned their full-size trucks. Like with the Ford, the Dodge is more of a fresh new wrapper on the existing vehicle rather than something completely new. But there are some things in the Dodge that are refreshingly new and those are the things that make me stand up and take notice.

### What's Hot

One of the first things I noticed about the Ram was the optional RamBox. This is a storage box contained in the sidewalls of the pickup bed that can store up to 120 cans of soda on each side, or all sorts of tools or camping gear or whatever. The RamBox features a lockable top lid to keep those sodas or tools safe as well as drains, so if you put ice in there to keep the sodas cool you're not looking at rust years down the road.

I actually used this feature when I drove the truck up from San Francisco. One of my stops along the way is at a restaurant supply store in Santa Rosa. Usually I bring a cooler along to keep the cold things at the right temperature, but this time I just put some ice in the RamBox and poured in milk, eggs, cheese and other perishables. When I got home two hours later, everything was still within the safety zone.

The good thing about the RamBox is that it's accessible from the sides of the truck, so you can still haul whatever you need to in the bed of the truck and still be able to access the stuff in the RamBox.

Speaking of the bed, the RamBox equipped Dodge has movable tie-downs in the bed so you could bring all your camping gear in the RamBox and put your bicycles or whatever in the bed, tie them in place and not worry about them flying out. There is also a cargo bed divider, which comes in handy so your whatever doesn't go flying around the cargo box. Rocks in the front, feathers in the back? No problem - the divider will keep the separate and it's movable so you can adjust the load situation.

This kind of innovation is what I think will make people look at the Ram and think, maybe, it is time for a pickup upgrade. Plus I would absolutely love to take one of these to a Jimmy Buffett concert or any other tailgating situation - it's perfect!

But wait, there's more. The interior of the Ram was as nice as any luxury car I've been in. Upholstery, trim and overall fit and finish were absolutely beautiful. The tested version was the Laramie, which is an upscale version, but this truly is one of those vehicles that's tough enough to work but soft enough for a night on the town.

As for the soft enough, Dodge is the first truck manufacturer who has figured out that the old-fashioned buggy springs everybody's been using since Edison drove a pickup (well, he probably didn't really) are old fashioned. Instead, Dodge uses a multi-link rear suspension with coil springs for both a smooth ride and good hauling capability.

To put the hauling capability to the test, we went to the new local hardware store and bought "as much bark as will fit in the thing." I always enjoy any adventure that includes tractors so we backed-up to the bin and the tractor guy loaded the Ram with landscaping bark.

He was particularly interested in the Ram

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## 2009 Herald Publications Best of the Best Awards

Herald Publications Best of the Best Awards gives the community an opportunity to let their voices be heard. The rules are very simple. All one has to do is submit a completed entry form to Herald Publications' office by **September 10, 2009. Results of this survey will be published in the September 17, 2009 issue.**

**Each individual in the community is invited to vote one time only.** The completed form must be on an original page of the newspaper. No photocopied entries will be accepted. To include your entry in our contest, simply fill the name of your favorite

establishment(s) and the city in which they are located, in the blank below each category. Then, mail or bring in your completed entry form by **September 10, 2009 at noon to:**

**Herald Publications**  
Attn: Best of the Best  
312 E. Imperial Ave.  
El Segundo, CA 90245

*Entry forms that are partially completed will be accepted however at least 20 of the categories must have entries.*

**BREAKFAST**

**JAPANESE**

**LUNCH**

**DONUT SHOP**

**DINNER**

**SANDWICH SHOP**

**HAPPY HOUR**

**GIFT STORE**

**PIZZA**

**PHYSICAL THERAPY/WELLNESS**

**ITALIAN**

**FLOORING/CARPET**

**CHINESE**

**YOGURT SHOP**

**MEXICAN**

**ICE CREAM SHOP**

**REALTOR - MALE**

**REALTOR - FEMALE**

**HANDYMAN**

**INSURANCE AGENT**

**VIDEO RENTAL**

**BANK**

**NAIL SALON**

**DENTIST**

**BEAUTY SHOP**

**PHYSICIAN**

**JEWELRY STORE**

**PHARMACY**

**CLOTHING STORE**

**AUTO REPAIR**

**COMPUTER STORE**

**BARBER SHOP**

**FLOWER SHOP**

**PET CARE**

**HOTEL**

**FITNESS**

**CONSTRUCTION**

**PLUMBER**

**COFFEE HOUSE**

**PAINTING**