

Ranger Rick's ADVENTURES

STORY BY GERRY BISHOP; ART BY THE CHARACTERSHOP

RANGER RICK RACCOON, SCARLETT FOX, AND BOOMER BADGER ARE HIKING IN THE OKALOOCOCHEE SLOUGH STATE FOREST IN FLORIDA. ("SLOUGH" RHYMES WITH "BOO.") THEY HOPE TO SPOT ONE OF THE RARE AND ENDANGERED FLORIDA PANTHERS THAT LIVE HERE.



OK, Boomer. Let's try it again. Say, oh-KAL-uh-wah-KOO-chee!

oh-KAL-uh-HOO-chee-KOO-chee.



Oh, Boomer! You're not trying hard enough.

Well, I give up! Where did such a strange name come from, anyway?

It's an American Indian word that means "shallow, dark waters." Most people call this place the "OK Slough," and you can, too.



Look—an alligator!

That's a big one!



Uh-oh. It's going for that turtle!



Will the turtle get away?

Don't know, but that splash sure scared those wood storks!



Did you hear that? Sounded like tires screeching and then a loud thump!

Come on—let's check it out!



There's a highway up ahead.

This gives me a very bad feeling.



Oh, NO! Look!

Boomer, I think we're going to need your phone.



Please help us! Our mom's been hit!

Call the wildlife hotline, Boomer. We need some wildlife officers, and fast!

And I'll give her some water!



OOOoooo. I hurt all over.

You're lucky to be alive. Help will be here soon.

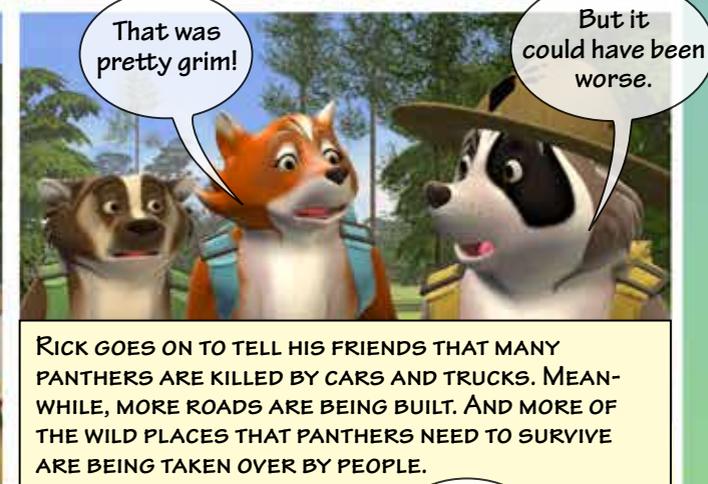
Yes, just try to stay calm.



A SHORT TIME LATER...

Here come the wildlife officers. They'll know what to do.

The lady on the phone said the cubs should stay right here.



That was pretty grim!

But it could have been worse.

RICK GOES ON TO TELL HIS FRIENDS THAT MANY PANTHERS ARE KILLED BY CARS AND TRUCKS. MEANWHILE, MORE ROADS ARE BEING BUILT. AND MORE OF THE WILD PLACES THAT PANTHERS NEED TO SURVIVE ARE BEING TAKEN OVER BY PEOPLE.



Did you see that?

Yeah, but what was it?



There it is again!

Looks like a panther!

It is, but not the same one as before.

Listen! Sounds like a fight!

Let's get closer!

It IS a fight—between two big males!

That one's hurt pretty bad.

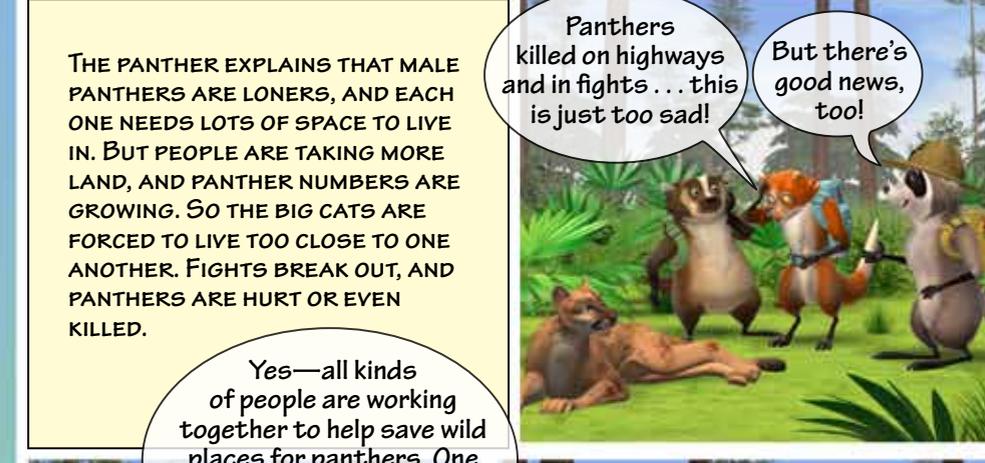
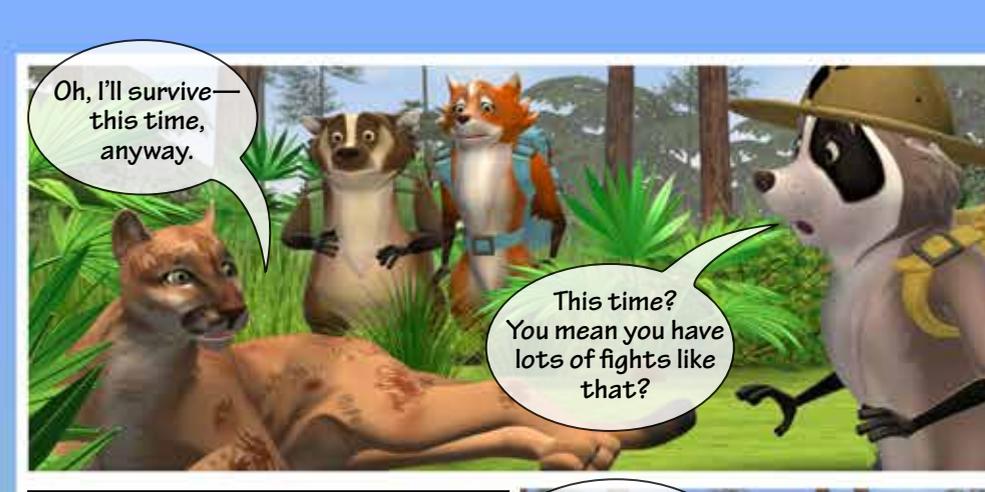
Let's follow and see if we can help him.

Looks as if he's resting. Think it's safe to go closer?

We'll soon find out.

Uh, hello. I'm Ranger Rick, and these are my friends, Scarlett and Boomer.

Are you OK? Can we help you?



Oh, I'll survive—this time, anyway.

This time? You mean you have lots of fights like that?

THE PANTHER EXPLAINS THAT MALE PANTHERS ARE LONERS, AND EACH ONE NEEDS LOTS OF SPACE TO LIVE IN. BUT PEOPLE ARE TAKING MORE LAND, AND PANTHER NUMBERS ARE GROWING. SO THE BIG CATS ARE FORCED TO LIVE TOO CLOSE TO ONE ANOTHER. FIGHTS BREAK OUT, AND PANTHERS ARE HURT OR EVEN KILLED.

Panthers killed on highways and in fights... this is just too sad!

But there's good news, too!

There is?

Yes—all kinds of people are working together to help save wild places for panthers. One group is the Florida Panther Protection Program, or FPPP.

I got it, Rick. Looks as if this state forest is a big part of the plan.

Boomer, would you find the FPPP Web site on your smart phone? It explains everything.

So, Boom, why don't you read the name out to us? Where are we, exactly?

Well, smarty pants Scarlett, that's easy enough. It's the OK Slough, as in, "Saving the Florida panthers is 'OK' with me!"

MORE FACTS

- Long ago, thousands of Florida panthers lived in a huge part of the southeastern United States. But people killed off the panthers until only a couple dozen survived in the wilds of southern Florida.
- Since the late 1960s, Florida panthers have been protected by law. Their numbers have now reached between 100 and 160 adults, with almost all of them living in the southern part of Florida. But every year, close to 20 are killed on highways or in fights.
- Through the Florida Panther Protection Program (FPPP), wildlife groups will be working with landowners to save the best panther habitat from development. They'll also try to link up patches of habitat so the panthers can move from one to another more easily. And they will be trying to move panthers into wild areas where they aren't living now. This may help keep males from fighting.
- The FPPP is just one plan for helping panthers. Some groups are trying to keep all remaining panther habitat from development.
- People can also help panthers by driving more carefully—especially at dawn and dusk, when the big cats are most active.

Ranger Rick 🐾