

Hermits must face disruptions in their Big Cypress hideaway



All quiet aside,
there's trouble
in tranquility

By JUANITA GREENE
Herald Environment Writer

Bob and Dorothy Davis live in a sort of Garden of Eden underneath a canopy of giant oaks, on ground covered with the ragged green of ferns. Yet all is not tranquil in their Big Cypress hideaway.

The Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, of all people, is disturbing Bob Davis' peace of mind.

"The fish and game people came right up to that oak tree," he says, pointing to a tree about 250 feet away from his front porch. "They were chasing a panther with dogs. They treed him there."

Davis thinks that is no way to treat a panther in the first place. In the second place, the chase could send the cat into inhabited areas like his, where his visiting grandchildren sometimes play in the yard.

"It upset me something awful," he says, puffing away on a cigaret. At 57, Davis has a trim figure and most of his hair.

"They had five vehicles parked right there and another

BILL FRAKES / Miami Herald Staff

Bob and Dorothy Davis: Panthers are right neighborly.

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vehicle farther down the road. That is \$60,000 worth of equipment to do something absolutely ridiculous."

It was almost enough to prompt Davis to take his plaques off the wall. They were certificates of appreciation from the Game Commission for serving on an advisory committee dealing with wild pets.

He thinks he and the panthers that are his neighbors should be allowed to live in the Big Cypress in peace.

"The main thing is they should stop harassing the panthers," he says.

Defending the treeing of the panther is Tommy Hines, supervisor of the Game Commission's wildlife research laboratory in Gainesville.

"What we are doing is a legitimate scientific project," he says. "We are treeing the cats, shooting them with a tranquilizer gun, taking them down and putting radio collars on them."

The cats are then released and tracked through the dense forest that is their favorite habitat.

The research, Hines says, will enable the game commission to work out a survival plan for the endangered panthers, believed to live only in the Big Cypress, the

nearby Fakahatchee Strand and Everglades National Park.

Hines estimates Florida's panther population at no more than 20. Three have been shot with tranquilizer guns and equipped with radio collars.

The reason Davis got so directly involved in the Game Commission's panther research is because he has chosen to live in a remote area deep in the Big Cypress, where there may be more panthers than people.

He owns 2½ acres across a canal from a dirt road. He is about a mile north of Alligator Alley, 80 miles from Miami, 30 from Immokalee, the nearest town. His closest neighbor is about 10 miles away.

A needed retreat

It's a good place to get away from it all. Davis says he needed the retreat after suffering a back injury while doing construction work for the Coast Guard, which put him on federal disability.

He bought the land about 11 years ago and lived on it part time until about three years ago, when he took up full-time residence there.

Herald staff photos by Bill Frakes

"Miami finally got to me," he says. "It's bad on a person. I had to get out of there."

Davis claims a panther comes to his yard to feed on chicken necks when they are left out in a pan marked "kitty cat." At about dusk, Dorothy puts the food in the dish, then goes inside and closes the door. The panther comes out of the shadows to feed, Bob says.

He is proud that the pan has no teeth marks. That shows the panther can be gentle when properly treated, he says.

The panther is not the only wild animal to be fed in the Davis' yard. There are two alligators, 27 raccoons with names and an undetermined number without names, an armadillo, an occasional bobcat or bear, wild turkeys and countless squirrels.

Still, Bob Davis says, "There isn't much wildlife left in the woods."

He blames people with guns.

"There are hunters who come out here and shoot everything in sight, including signs and fence posts. I've had the shots come right near my windows."

Davis himself does not hunt and owns no guns. He seldom fishes.

Plenty of chores

There is plenty to do around "Opossum Lane" to keep his mind off such annoyances.

"There's not enough time to get everything done even though we stay busy," says Dorothy, 58, a blonde who doesn't weigh 100 pounds or measure five feet.

There is a garden to tend. Many of the bare spots under the trees have been turned to yielding black earth where tender green shoots appear. Last year's crop of turnip roots and greens is in glass jars in her bountiful pantry.

"The freeze we had in January killed off all the tomatoes," Dorothy says, "so we had to put in a whole new crop."

There is wood to chop. Bob built his own fireplace, with stone from North Carolina.

There are things to fix. All the work is done by Bob and Dorothy. He built the airy, broad-shingled four-room house. He dug the well and installed the inside plumbing and the outside pitcher pump. He put in the wiring for the lights that run from the gasoline generator.

"My electricity bill is about \$2 a month, for gasoline," Bob says.

"We are always fixing things and changing things and building things," Dorothy says.

Bob hung long chains from a tall tree for a swing, made a fake whiskey still for a conversation piece, built a dock over the weed-choked canal where the gators come when Dorothy rings a bell, put in the bee hives that attract the bear, planted the sour orange trees for marmelade.

"I built the television antenna



Sign in front of 'Opossum





Bob hung long chains from a tall tree for a swing, made a fake whiskey still for a conversation piece, built a dock over the weed-choked canal where the gators come when Dorothy rings a bell, put in the bee hives that attract the bear, planted the sour orange trees for marmelade.

"I built the television antenna so tall that it picks up Tampa," Bob says. "We can also pick up Castro in Cuba. He will stand there and talk for two hours."

Feeding the gators

The days of Bob and Dorothy follow a quiet rhythm.

"Our day begins when the squirrels and coons wake us up by climbing outside the front windows," he says. "After we give them the bird seed, we have breakfast. Then we feed the gators and take a walk around the garden. By the time we do the little chores around the house, the day is gone."

Although the Davis property is in the Big Cypress National Preserve, the federal government did not buy it. He got an exemption, he says.

He's glad the federal govern-



Plenty of garden produce is canned.

ment bought the preserve.

"The way the land was being abused something had to be done," he says. "Everything was being destroyed."

Which brings up something else that disturbs his tranquility. Again the source of his irritation is the Game Commission, which exercises authority over hunters who drive half-tracks, swamp buggies, balloon-tired tricycles, trucks and other vehicles.

"I can't believe the way they are permitting people to tear up

these woods with every type of vehicle you can think of," he says. "And the places they call camping areas are nothing but garbage heaps."

He reflects for a moment, then adds, "I'm pretty upset about that."

The sun makes bright blotches on the green ground. The wind rustles the branches of the tall trees. The only sound is of a squirrel fussing. Opossum Lane seems so peaceful. But appearances can be deceiving.

