



Florida's wildlife corridor must expand

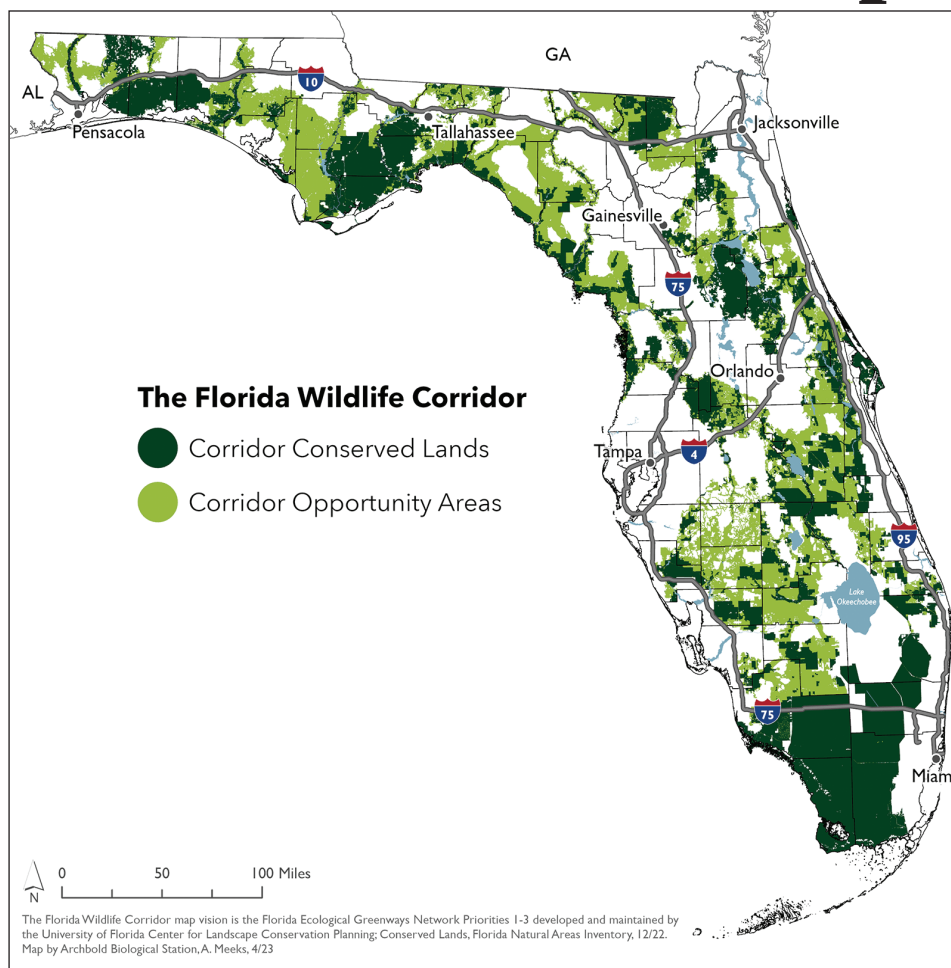
■ BY DELORES SAVAS

"You can think about Florida's wildlife corridor As Florida's 'green infrastructure; The heart and lungs of the state."
Calton Ward Jr.
National Geographic Society
photographer

The holiday season is just about upon us, extending from Halloween through January 1. It will be a time for traveling on busy roadways to meet with family and friends, especially during Thanksgiving and Christmas. But these special holidays can be marred by a car accident on a major highway or a narrow two-lane road. One of the major causes is collisions with wildlife. According to State Farm Insurance Company's annual analysis, you will have a one-in-487 chance of hitting a wild animal in the period from October through December. The company also estimates that there were over 1.8 million animal collision insurance claims in the United States between July 1 of last year and June 30 of this year.

Most of the animals involved in our state are Florida panthers, deer, coyotes, farm animals and lost or dumped dogs. Bears are also victims of collisions with highway traffic. The Black bear's habitat is interspersed with highways and roads. While searching for resources, including food and mates, bears thus often cross busy roads. Many make it across, but others are struck and wounded or killed. According to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), "Bears cause greater damage to cars than even deer, and can cause serious injury to drivers and passengers alike."

Vehicle collisions are responsible



for 90 percent of the known bear deaths. Bears are most active around dusk and dawn, and more accidents happen around these times than any other. Panther deaths due to traffic collisions are on the rise.

Last year there were 27 such casualties caused by vehicles.

According to the U.S. Department of Transportation, collisions with animals lead to some 200 human deaths and 26,000 injuries each year, resulting in more than \$8 billion in property damage, healthcare costs and lost workdays.

In Florida, the cause of all this turmoil is the loss of wildlife habitat due to the massive growth of the human

population in the state. Wild animals have been forced to vacate their normal habitats and venture into and travel onto roads and highways in search of food and shelter to raise their young in harmony with nature.

Many environmental groups, such as the Defenders of Wildlife and the Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation, alarmed at the prospects for the loss of a healthy ecosystem, have rolled up their sleeves and campaigned to expand the Florida wildlife corridor that is comprised of over 18 million acres of land and shoreline.

Wildlife corridors are man-made linkages between areas of intact wildlife habitat that enable animals to navigate barriers such as roads and housing developments. On July 1, 2021 the Florida Legislatures unanimously passed the Florida Wildlife Corridor Act. The law directs the Florida Department of Environmental Protection to encourage and promote investments in the areas that protect and enhance the Florida wildlife corridor. They set aside \$400 million to begin funding "incentives for conservation and sustainable development," as the new language states. Of that amount, \$100 million went to the Florida Forever land conservation program, and \$300 million went to

acquiring land through actual purchases or conservation easement.

The ability to migrate plays an important role in supporting biodiversity by enabling animals to safely travel to find mates, food and shelter. This increase in migration results in increased genetic diversity within the animal and plant species and ensures their resistance to disease and harmful genetic mutations due to inbreeding that could lead to extinction.

Good news occurred on May 23, 2023, when by a unanimous Cabinet vote, 39,583 more acres of the Florida wildlife corridor were approved for permanent protection, bringing conservation lands within the corridor to 119,939 acres – a win for Florida's ecology, economy and residents. All the properties approved for acquisition or conservation easement during the May 23 Cabinet meeting were made possible through collaboration with the public and private funds of the state's Rural and Family Land Protection and Florida Forever programs.

While this is great news, many are concerned that the Florida wildlife corridor must be expanded and completed by 2030. Florida is expected to be home to more than four million new residents by that time, and the evolving demographic and geographic changes will have a direct impact on Florida wildlife habitats.

"So many people are moving to the state; there is a demand for more homes, more water supply, more commercial areas," said Jason Lauritsen, chief conservation officer of the Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation. "The challenge is, how do we design, develop and zone communities responsibly? There is an immediate and pressing need to plan development with the corridor in mind."

Otherwise, said Carlton Ward Jr., "Most farms and ranches are going to be subdivisions in our lifetime, and houses will be our final crop."

SOURCES

floridawildlifecorridor.org
 defenders.org
 livewildly.com

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