

Famous Panther Joins Florida State Park System

Don Juan transferred from Busch Gardens Amusement Park in Tampa.

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Don Juan, a Florida panther, has a new home in Homosassa Springs Wildlife State Park north of Tampa. Don Juan, an 11-year-old male panther who has fathered approximately 30 offspring in the wild at Big Cypress Swamp near Naples, Fla., has a new place to call home. The panther was recently welcomed at Homosassa Springs Wildlife State Park, 75 miles north of Tampa.

The relocation of Florida Panther #79, also known as Don Juan, was a partnership between the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's (DEP) Florida Park Service and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWCC). The panther made its debut Dec. 8 after being transferred from Busch Gardens Amusement Park in Tampa.

Don Juan was relocated to Homosassa Springs Wildlife State Park because Busch Gardens, the panther's home for the past two years, was getting ready to conduct habitat restoration on the area he occupied, said spokeswoman Jessica Kemper.

Don Juan is the first Florida panther to call a Florida state park home. The big cat weighs approximately 130 pounds.

Mike Bullock, Florida park service director, said Homosassa's wildlife facilities make a great home for this endangered Florida panther to be cared for. "His relocation to the park will play an important role in educating the park's visitors on the necessity of wildlife conservation and protection," he said.

The panther will share the habitat now used by the park's 9-year-old female Western cougar, Maygar. The animals will be rotated and will not occupy the habitat at the same time, park officials said.

Visitors can approach the habitat from a glass viewing area. The habitat is a fenced-in space with trees, large rocks and plants.