

One Wild Rescue

Sherwood's WildCat Haven gives cougars, bobcats and other big felines a new lease on life

By Kelly Moyer

The Sherwood Gazette, Sep 6, 2007
Jaime Valdez / The Times

Maybe it's those wide, innocent eyes or the way their kitten fur feels softer than cashmere. Possibly, it's all that sweet meowing that disarms people. Whatever it is, wildcat breeders know how to work it.

"They know exactly what to say," says Cheryl Tuller. "They are fully aware that cougars, bobcats and other wildcats don't make good pets, but they'll convince you that they do."

Tuller herself was once fooled by a smooth-talking bobcat breeder from southern Oregon.

"She told me that, if I just fed it regular cat food, it wouldn't be a problem," Tuller says, shaking her head at the memory. "Well, after a few months I realized what I'd done. But by then it was too late."

Like most people who buy wildcats as pets, Tuller soon found out exactly what happens when you try to live with a bobcat or a cougar or, as is increasingly common, an African serval.

"They spray all over your house, they'll kill your domestic cats and they'll make a huge mess," Tuller says. "They're just not meant to be pets."

Most people in Tuller's situation have no idea what to do once the reality of keeping a cougar in their bedroom hits home. They usually try to get rid of the cat — any way they can.

Tuller didn't want to see her bobcat, BoBo, suffer because of her own ignorance, so she got in touch with a woman who operated a wildcat sanctuary in the Midwest.

"She told me just how wrong I'd been and I started to learn about these cats," Tuller says.

Soon, Tuller and her husband, Michael, were building an outdoor area for BoBo and starting to take in other wildcats abandoned by people who had tried and failed to turn them into obedient pets.

Nine years later, the Tuller own 8 acres in the hills above Sherwood and operate WildCat Haven, a rescue operation dedicated to giving big cats a safe, secure place to live and to educating the public against buying wild felines as pets.

"No captive-born or any wildcat should be relegated to living a life in a small concrete cage, especially a cat as majestic as a North American cougar," Tuller says.



Cougars DJ, left, and Nada used to live in tiny cages on a concrete floor. Rescued by the folks at WildCat Haven, the cats now spend their days cuddling.

That's where DJ and Nada, two of the cougars that now roam an ample 2,000-square-foot enclosure at Tuller's WildCat Haven, once lived.

A man from Michigan bought the cougars when they were four-pound babies and kept them in small cages with concrete floors.

Seven years later, the cougars transferred to WildCat Haven where they share a space filled with grass, trees, perches, dens and hiding spots. Once kept far away from each other, now DJ and Nada rarely spend a minute not cuddling with one another.

Up the hill, away from the cougar area, are smaller spaces — still filled with grasses and trees — for the bobcats, servals, lynx and the one pointy-eared caracal that live at Wildcat Haven.

BoBo, the cat that started all this, is there. He lives with a Canadian lynx and another bobcat, which he gets along with just fine, but when humans come nearby, BoBo demonstrates his dislike of all thing bipedal.

“And imagine,” Tuller says, laughing at the now-hissing BoBo. “He lived in my house for two years!”

In one enclosure, a pretty bobcat ignores the humans but keeps a close eye on Tuller's friendly dog.

The woman who owned this bobcat brought her to WildCat Haven a few years ago wearing a pink rhinestone collar.

“She told me she wanted her body back after she died so she could have it stuffed,” Tuller says. “I told her exactly what I thought of her.”

Needless to say, most of that probably isn't fit for print.

But it does demonstrate what goes on in people's minds when they buy a bobcat or cougar. They're generally looking for something to show off, to display for their friends. But what they get is 100 pounds of angry wildcat.

Sometimes, though, Tuller's rescue helps cats that weren't born in captivity. Kennewick is one such cat. The cougar came to WildCat Haven two years ago after a woman from Kennewick, Wash., Ruth Hall, discovered him inside a local mechanic's shop, badly torn up and bleeding from his mouth and tail. Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife was going to euthanize the cougar, but first they called Tuller. Many vet trips later, Kennewick came to live full-time at the Sherwood sanctuary.

Tuller says he's distrustful of humans and, sure enough, when she walks past his pen, Kennewick starts hissing and growling like he'd do some real damage if they'd just let him out of this place.

They can't let him out, of course. Any wild animal that get too imprinted on humans cannot be released, but if it weren't for WildCat Haven, most of these gorgeous cats wouldn't be alive today.

Unfortunately, the demand for wildcats seems to be getting worse, Tuller says. She doesn't open her sanctuary to the public because she's not operating a zoo, but she does try to educate people in other ways. There are laws in some areas banning people from keeping a wildcat in their home, but what really needs to happen is some sort of legislation to prevent the breeding of these animals, Tuller says. Until then, people will keep breeding and they will find some unsuspecting person to buy one of their cuddly, three-pound cougars. And when that cougar becomes a growling, 140-pound animal chasing the neighborhood children, those breeders won't be the

ones taking care of the problem.

Of course, keeping a rescue of this size -- Tuller has nearly 40 wildcats in her sanctuary — takes time and money. WildCat Haven has a dedicated group of volunteers (Tuller doesn't allow just anybody to volunteer though, so unless you have experience with wild animals, you probably can't work for the sanctuary) and a fund-raising board of directors, but it costs thousands of dollars just to keep the cats in food and shelter.

Tuller feeds the cats more than 100 pounds of human-grade meat each day, which adds up to about \$3,000 a month. And the demand for more sanctuary space is out there. Right now, Wildcat Haven is constructing a new, 3,600-square-foot cougar pen for two cougars in need of a home, and that takes funding. Each of the 14-foot cougar pens cost about \$10,000 to build.

The Haven is always looking for donations to buy food, hammocks and other treats (like whole, frozen rabbits for the cougars) for the cats, and Tuller has a great Web site, www.wildcathaven.org, for people interested in seeing the wildcats. There's also a wish list on the Web site and more information about the haven and their annual fund-raising events.

For more information visit, visit www.wildcathaven.org.