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Tammy Quist's Wildcat Sanctuary helps big cats remain wild at heart

J. Pinkley, Star Tribune

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Editor's note: This article has been corrected to repair an inaccuracy in the number of wild cats at the sanctuary.

Tammy Quist wasn't at all surprised to receive a phone call when the story about a tiger cub named Anna was in the news a few weeks back. Malnourished 35-pound Anna was found chewing on a piece of chicken in the Albert Lea, Minn., home she shared with a family that included a fifth-grade boy who had been bitten and scratched.

Quist, founder and executive director of the Wildcat Sanctuary in Anoka County, is all too familiar with such stories. Wildcat, one of only seven accredited sanctuaries in the country, gets about 30 calls a month.

"People buy these animals as cute, cuddly cubs and quickly get in over their heads," said Quist, who runs the all-volunteer sanctuary.

They want to know why their exotic cat is biting "and, if they can't make it stop, they don't want it anymore."

Minnesota has no laws regulating the sale and care of exotic animals, making it relatively easy for people to purchase them. Anna's owner bought her legally for \$2,500 from a breeder in Red Wing, Minn. Quist says classified ads in the newspaper offer a variety of exotic cats for sale, ranging in price from hundreds to thousands of dollars.

As a result, Quist's sanctuary has no vacancies. Her 10-acre property is home to 20 medium-sized wild cats, including Meme, a large Bengal tiger.

Purchased in Redwood Falls, Minn., Meme's primary job was to produce three litters a year for her owner -- litters that would produce a substantial income. She was housed for 20 years in a 10-by-10-foot concrete pen with no entry door. Her food, often roadkill, commingled with her feces. She was severely arthritic by the time Quist learned about her.

Endangered species

"Her owner had become too old to care for the cats anymore," Quist said. "He shot most of them but realized, before shooting the tigers, that he could get in trouble for harming an endangered species." After trying unsuccessfully to place Meme through phone calls, Quist headed to Redwood Falls.

She took one look at Meme, bloody in the face and hips from rubbing against her cage, "and I couldn't put her down. I had to show her that all humans do not treat animals like this."

Within seven days, she secured city approval and funding to put up a pen at Wildcat. Today, Meme has her own swimming pool and a spacious, 10-foot-high pen with an additional 10-by-10-foot lockout, an area where the cat can be held during cage maintenance.

Nala, a lioness, is another success story. A couple from northern Minnesota bought her for \$120 at an auction. As she grew, Nala used her owners' house as a jungle gym and began urinating on the floor. Her owners tried moving her outdoors and tied tires to her neck to slow her down. When that didn't work, they confined her to a dog crate, where she rubbed herself raw turning in circles. Quist placed Nala in a 20-acre sanctuary in Colorado.

Nokomis, a cougar, came to her facility with blackened, rotted teeth from being fed a steady diet of wet domestic-cat food. Nokomis' baby teeth were pulled and his adult teeth came in unaffected.

No organization tracks the sale or ownership of exotic pets, but the Humane Society of the United States estimates that 10,000 tigers are in private hands nationwide, a number higher than the world's wild tiger population. A new coalition called the Captive Wild Animal Protection Coalition (<http://www.cwapc.org>), comprising zoo professionals, sanctuary operators and animal protection groups, is putting together the first national database on exotic animals kept as pets. The coalition also supports animal welfare legislation, funds animal sanctuaries and educates the public.

Quist, 30, had every intention of climbing the corporate ladder when she graduated with a marketing degree from the University of St. Thomas in 1993. But while volunteering for a local large-cat trainer, she was distraught when he sold a male lion to a roadside zoo.

Her interest in protecting exotic animals led her to contact actress Tippi Hedren, who starred in Alfred Hitchcock's "The Birds" and is president of the American Sanctuary Association and owner of the Roar Foundation's Shambala Preserve, an exotic-animal sanctuary in California.

Opened sanctuary

Quist visited Shambala, then continued her quest in Georgia, where she worked for Coca-Cola, but spent her free time publicizing the plight of large cats. She opened a sanctuary there in 1998, but became overwhelmed by the number of animals that needed help. So she returned to Minnesota a few years ago and opened the no-kill Wildcat Sanctuary. She has been known to drive 900 miles -- one way -- to deliver a cat to its new home.

Accreditation means that she must meet stiff standards for care and safety. Veterinarian Dr. John Baillie says that Quist surpasses those standards. He donates as much as \$20,000 in veterinary care annually

and sits on Wildcat's board of directors.

Quist and other volunteers check the perimeter fence daily for any weaknesses, and have built a double padlock system. "Because these cats are wild, they're unpredictable," she said.

Phone calls to area residents seem to confirm that her formula is working. No one contacted knew the facility was there.

"I don't think people should be trying to raise these animals as pets in the first place," said Pam Maltby of East Bethel, "so if they're [the sanctuary] adopting them, I guess that's a good thing."

Theresa Isum also was unaware of the sanctuary, about 5 miles from her home. She says she'd like to see the facility open to the public. "It'd be wonderful if they could open it up to educate kids and those of us who'd like to know more about these animals so we can help them.'

Quist, an account manager for Fallon Intersect, an advertising agency, recently donated time and materials for a marketing campaign for the sanctuary. Because it is nonprofit, the sanctuary survives on donations, both monetary and in-kind, such as electrical and carpentry services, and building materials.

As Quist strolls the grounds cooing at her "cats," they greet her in a variety of ways. Meme "chuffs," a grunting sound that contented tigers use. Josie, a cougar, playfully swats at a feather toy dangled outside her cage. She calms Nokomis, whom she calls "Nokomie," as he angrily stares down the camera pointed in his direction.

Quist says her ultimate dream is legislation that would make her sanctuary unnecessary.

"If we can't pass a law tomorrow, at least we can let these animals be wild at heart at a place where it's safe for them to be wild at heart."

RESOURCES

To donate

Donations received by April 30 will be matched by an anonymous donor. Donations can be mailed to:

The Wildcat Sanctuary, P.O. Box 202, Cedar, MN 55011.

E-mail: cat@wildcatsanctuary.org

Web: <http://www.wildcatsanctuary.org>

Phone: 763-444-8545

To learn more

Humane Society of the United States: <http://www.hsus.org/ace/14768>

The Captive Wild Animal Protection Coalition: <http://www.cwapc.org>

American Sanctuary Association: <http://www.asaanimalsanctuaries.org/>

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