

twin cities

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Cat and Household Pet Section

THE WILDCAT SANCTUARY

Mary Tan

He has eyes that any pet lover adores. He's a ball of fur who loves to chomp on leather gloves and eat snacks hidden in paper towel rolls. You'd think this fella is a pampered pooch. He isn't. He's a cat. A really big one, and one that many say should never be a household animal.

Kodiak is a Canadian lynx who was once an exhibit cat. He's considered an endangered species and lives at the Wildcat Sanctuary in rural Isanti County, Minn. Here, he and 19 other creatures share a 10-acre habitat just about 30 minutes north of the Twin Cities.

The lynx came to the sanctuary with all four paws declawed and virtually no energy because of problems with allergies. Although he still doesn't exert himself very much, it's clear Kodiak now has a comfortable future.

He can thank Tammy Quist, the founder of the only accredited big-cat sanctuary in the upper Midwest. Quist started the big-cat haven several years ago after being upset at seeing how some exotic animals were being treated. Quist works for a Minneapolis advertising agency. One day while working on an advertisement featuring a black leopard and a tiger, she learned "the animals' owner had no credentials or specialized training." She was even more alarmed when she found out there were no laws at the time prohibiting the ownership of exotic animals.

Protecting wildcats soon became her mission. She couldn't believe a person could "keep cougars in six-by-six kennels, or tigers in 10-by-10 cages." Quist was even more distraught when she learned "these dimensions meet US Department of Agriculture standards."

Meme the Bengal tiger came to the Wildcat Sanctuary from those kinds of conditions. She lived



Meme



Kodiak, a Canadian lynx

in Red Wing, Minn. in a small, dark, and cold corn crib with barely any room to lie down. When Quist picked up the 25-year-old cat, she found her eating roadkill in her feces. Meme came from a breeder who bred her for more than 20 years. When her owner became too old to care for her, Quist says "he was going to shoot her," until he realized it was

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Meme



no Dogs Allowed continued...

illegal to harm an endangered species.

So who are the people who own these animals? Quist says they are often people who think "if you love these animals, they'll love you back. They are naive and often get them as cute cuddly cubs. But then the animals bite, and they can't get them to stop. That's when they become unwanted." Others are breeders who try to sell the animals to make a profit.

Wildlife experts say many people who buy wildcats fail to understand the difficulties of caring for and containing them properly. Quist says "They're in over their heads. Unlike a dog or cat, these animals need to be allowed to free-roam, living their lives as nature intended. The animals have a natural instinct that will always be there. People don't think about 10 years down the line, when the cat becomes an adult. Too often, these animals are impulse buys, and it ends up tragic for the owner, the public, and the animal."

The Humane Society of the United States estimates there are 10,000 cats like MeMe and Kodiak living as pets in this country. Many are suffering or victims of abuse. But it's difficult to quantify how many are out there because many owners do not register their exotic animals.

There are only 14 sanctuaries in the country that accept large cats. The Wildcat Sanctuary receives

more than 30 calls a month from individuals wanting to surrender a pet. The sanctuary is home to breeds like tigers, bobcats, African Servals, and cougars. The safe haven has run out of space and is currently trying to find a county that would permit the organization to operate a bigger sanctuary.

Quist often travels all over the country to pick up an animal or deliver it to another sanctuary that has space. Her organization has an operating budget of around a \$150,000 a year, which is solely raised through private donations. She says "that money is not nearly enough to help the unwanted animals, who have specific needs and need veterinary care for the rest of their lives." She admits "we have lots of financial struggles."

Minnesota passed a law last year that restricts the breeding and the selling of exotic breeds. It took effect in January, but owners who already have big cats are exempted from the law thanks to a grandfather clause.

In an ideal world, Quist wishes there would be no need for her sanctuary. She says public officials and the public often tell her what a "great job" she and her volunteers do. But until everyone gets the message that these animals were never meant to be pets, there's no doubt she'll be in business for a long time.

How to Help

There are many ways you can help these unwanted creatures. The sanctuary is in need of donations, and there are

a variety of programs from which you can choose.

- The Wildcat Sanctuary has a building fund to build a bigger and better facility, a legacy and gift program to honor or memorialize a loved one, and sponsorships of individual animals. Any gift is appreciated, as the organization is a reality thanks to generous support in the past.
- Don't have the cash to give? Why not volunteer your services? The Sanctuary is in need of people who have fundraising or carpentry experience.
- The sanctuary also has a wish list, which includes items like gift cards from The Home Depot or Menards, rakes, shovels, hoses, fiberglass ladders, clumping cat litter, or garbage bags.
- Finally, you can attend the 2005 "Jungle Boogie." It's the yearly fundraiser for the Wildcat Sanctuary. It's on Friday, September 16, 2005 at Bandana Square in St Paul. Single tickets are \$75.00, corporate tables are available too. Be sure to break out the leopard print! It's "Jungle Formal!"

For more information contact:
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