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South Bend Tribune

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Unlikely Cass residents forced to move on

Cougars headed to new digs in Oregon after rescue from Jones pole barn

By ADAM JACKSON
 Tribune Staff Writer

Ask any schoolkid what kind of animals are found in barns, and odds are, they'll rattle off a list of old standards like cows, pigs and horses.

The odds are also pretty good that they won't include cougars on the list.

Which makes the story of DJ and Nada all the more astonishing. The two fully grown cougars are now on their way to a wildlife sanctuary in Oregon, after a Michigan Department of Natural Resources conservation officer found them living in a pole barn in Jones.

Cass County Animal Control Director Patrick Fetherston said the animals belonged to Harold Brown, a Newberg Township resident who has owned them since 1996. But after Michigan DNR officer Jeff Robinette discovered the animals in January, there was no question that they would have to be removed, due to the fact that they were not in compliance with Michigan's Large Carnivore Act.

"Number one, the animals were in violation of the act," Fetherston said. "Number two, what happens if they get out?"

Brown, upon notification of the violation, was open and cooperative with authorities about giving up the cougars. The trouble was, no one knew whom to give them to. Zoos do not generally take privately owned animals as donations because of the need to keep



Nada, a 100-pound female cougar, was rescued from a Jones residence Sunday after her owner voluntarily gave her up to avoid a violation of Michigan's Large Carnivore Act. Together with DJ, a male cougar from the same residence, she is headed to a wildcat sanctuary in Oregon.

Photos provided/CASS COUNTY ANIMAL CONTROL



their genetic stock pure for breeding programs.

"We called every zoo in the state," Fetherston said. "It was suggested to us that we check with the American Sanctuary Association, which lists sanctuaries according to what types of animals they deal with."

And that's how Fetherston found Tammy Quist, who heads up The Wildcat Sanctuary in Minnesota. The nonprofit, 10-acre operation relies entirely on public contributions to provide a last-hope, no-kill haven for unwanted or abused wildcats.

Unfortunately, Quist's operation is at full capacity now. But that didn't stop her from going to bat for DJ and Nada. Instead, she offered to arrange for the cougars' pick-up, their spaying and neutering, and then to drive them to Wildcat Haven, another sanctuary in Sherwood, Ore., where the cats can live out the rest of their days in peace.

"People get these animals when they are little, then they don't know what to do with them when they reach adulthood," said Quist, who started her sanctuary after witnessing the mistreatment of a group of wildcats by a photographer. "Unfortunately, most states don't have laws against purchasing these animals and keeping them in pens and cages."



DJ, a 180-pound male cougar, was rescued from a Jones residence Sunday.

But Michigan does, and DJ and Nada needed a new home. Which is why Fetherston, Quist, and Robinette, accompanied by Dr. David Visser, a veterinarian from the Roseland Animal Clinic, found themselves at Brown's home on Sunday, looking to remove DJ and Nada from the 10-foot-by-10-foot pens they've lived in since 1996 and get them on their way.

It was not the easiest of jobs.

"They are very unsocialized animals," Fetherston said. "The owner could get in and pet the female, but he pretty much didn't have anything to do with the male."

A tranquilizer gun was used on Nada with little effect, but she was eventually enticed into a transport cage by disguising it to look like a dark den. DJ was also caged, and the cats were driven to Minnesota, where they were given thorough checkups and underwent spaying and neutering operations.

"They were healthy, although they were both very overweight from all those years of being cooped up in those small pens," Quist said. "But they came through OK, and we will be moving them out to Oregon soon."

There, DJ and Nada should have the time of their lives. Quist said the operators of Wildcat Haven plan to house the big cats in 36-foot-by-64-foot pens, which will include perches for climbing, plenty of room to roam, sunshine, and things the animals have never experienced before, like natural grass.

In the meantime, Fetherston, said, he'll be hoping that folks who hear of the cougars' saga will think twice before making the decision to bring any more big cats into Cass County.

"This is the first time this has happened," he said. "I'm hoping there aren't anymore."

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