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## Pine Co. sanctuary bears burden of boom in big cats

The 40-acre Wildcat Sanctuary has found a niche, and demand is already outstripping space.

By **Darlene Prois**, Star Tribune

Last update: January 07, 2007 – 11:41 PM

SANDSTONE, Minn. -- The Wildcat Sanctuary, the state's only certified home for exotic cats, had 20 felines when it moved out of Isanti County last year after its relationship with township leaders grew contentious.

Since last spring, the sanctuary's new home on a remote 40-acre Pine County plot has enabled it to take in more cats than ever. Last month, its population grew to more than 50, including seven big cats that arrived from New York in December.

The move increased the sanctuary's size and prominence, and so far, there has been no local resistance to its mission. But problems with captive wildlife have been cropping up so quickly nationwide that the facility already struggles to meet the challenges, said Tammy Quist, founder and executive director.

"We can't keep up this pace forever," she said. "We thought this would be a 100-animal facility in five or six years, but we're still getting 30 calls a

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month. We just can't say yes to everyone." patrons

The sanctuary moved from Athens Township in rural Isanti County after a dispute erupted there over the extended presence of a Bengal tiger named Meme. In February, a contentious public hearing attracted nearly 200 people. The township board threatened to revoke the sanctuary's operating permit, which forbade tigers and limited the number of animals to 20.

But before the matter could be resolved, Meme died of cancer. By then, the sanctuary's move was already underway to Pine County, which has no ordinances regulating the ownership of wild cats.

So far, there have been no complaints. "It's never been an issue raised to the board," said county Commissioner Roger Nelson.

Pine County officials do know the sanctuary is there, however. Barely two weeks after Quist's arrival, authorities called her to deal with two emaciated tigers after a third hungry animal killed their owner, Cynthia Gamble.

"Tammy was extremely helpful," said Pine County Chief Deputy Sheriff Steve Ovick. "We would have had to have the animals shipped to another state if she hadn't been there. There aren't a lot of choices out there."

### **Ironic twist**

Ironically, it was Gamble, owner of the nearby Center for Endangered Cats, who first raised Quist's awareness of the problems associated with captive wildlife, more than a decade ago. Quist was then an account manager at Fallon Advertising when one of Gamble's tigers was brought in for a commercial shoot.

"The death of that woman really personalized it for me," said Quist. "She did this for a living and knew cats. Could I have prevented this tragedy if I had been doing this 10 years ago?"

Her facility is the only accredited big cat sanctuary in the upper Midwest and one of 14 across the nation, and she has become acutely aware of the underground world of exotic pet breeding and its associated problems. People and authorities seek her out, wanting to surrender exotic pets purchased over the Internet or hand over abused animals seized from shut-down breeding facilities.

With other licensed facilities closing because of costs, and increased enforcement of laws that forbid harboring exotic animals, Quist already has a list of 42 big cats waiting for homes. She would have hundreds of smaller cats -- servals and domestic/wildcat hybrids -- if she accepted every request she received.

Even the largest humane society in the state can't address this particular need, said Keith Streff of the Animal Humane Society in Golden Valley.

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"Without this type of an organization there are very few options available," said Streff. "What do you do with an illegal mountain lion in someone's basement? It might be a relatively well-cared for animal, but if law enforcement finds it, it's like a death sentence."

Quist left the high-style advertising world last year to spend full-time in sweats and muddy boots at the nonprofit sanctuary. Closed to the public, the facility is a secure refuge for wildcats that would otherwise be destroyed. With an annual operating budget of more than \$250,000, it subsists on private donations as well as thousands of hours of work each year from more than 100 volunteers.

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By **Darlene Prois**, Star Tribune

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The sanctuary's most recent additions -- three cougars, three lions and a leopard -- were part of one of the largest nationwide animal rescues ever. The closing of the Catskill Game Farm in New York drew widespread media coverage on the East Coast after animal welfare activists rallied to prevent the farm's 950 animals from going to breeders or becoming victims of captive hunts. National and East Coast organizations raised most of the funds needed to bring the animals to the Wildcat Sanctuary.

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### Exotic hybrids

Quist shares a temporary live-in office -- a crumbling single-wide mobile home -- with 20 unruly cats, most of which don't use a litter box. When they're not spraying furniture, the scrappy felines scratch, fight and shamelessly leap onto tables and counters. Most are bengals, a cross between Asian wildcats and domestic cats.

With their house-cat size, exotic slanted eyes and striking spotted markings, the fancy felines fetch

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up to \$2,500. Savannahs, a larger hybrid cross between domestic cats and African servals, can cost over \$10,000. But despite the price and breeder guarantees, owners frequently discover that wildness can't be bred out. The cats are often surrendered for aggressiveness or unacceptable toileting habits.

Quist and her husband -- who is allergic to cats -- are building their home on the sanctuary property. When it is finished, she vows that none of the felines will share it with them. Except for necessary health care, Quist rarely touches the animals.

Her dream is to eventually put herself out of business. She would rather stop the pipeline of abused and abandoned animals through legislation. In 2004, she helped draft Minnesota's exotic animal law, which restricts breeding and selling of exotic animals as well as keeping them as pets. She actively supports Haley's Act, pending federal legislation named for Haley Hilderbrand, a 17-year old Kansas girl who was killed by a Siberian tiger during a senior portrait session.

"We'll never be able to save them all," said Quist. "That's why we spend just as much energy supporting legislation and education about why these animals shouldn't end up in a sanctuary."

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