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Photo by Andre Ranieri
 To Sebring, Tawni has become a seventy-five pound housecat, following him about his daily chores. Cougars, once domesticated, become so friendly that they cannot be released back into the wild.

COUGARS
 Continued from Page 17

said, pointing to his living room window, "and watch the cats leaping from tree to tree."

Being a cougar in Oregon is especially difficult, Sebring said. He estimated that only 800 to 900 cougars are left in the wild in Oregon, although other estimates range from hundreds to thousands.

The major threat to cougars' survival in the wild is game hunters, many of whom pay up to \$5,000 to hunt cougars, and another \$5,000 to have their kills stuffed, Sebring said.

Last year, 400 permits were issued, and 240 cougars were killed, Sebring said. The animals killed averaged about 90 pounds and 2 years of age — an adolescent in cougar terms.

Sebring spends two or three hours a day with each of his cougars.

He takes the cats for walks, letting them swim in the nearby river, which is a favorite activity of Tawni's. "Cougars swim

better than any dog," Sebring said.

Each cougar eats about five pounds of raw meat a day. Although they will eat fish, they prefer such meat as bear, deer, mutton, beef, and occasionally chicken.

The meat costs 60 cents a pound, which adds up to about \$1000 for meat per cat per year. In addition, Sebring said, building the enclosures is expensive, and there are veterinary bills for checkups and flea repellents.

Money is a problem for Sebring and his cougars, who rely almost completely on donations. Sebring held a benefit at the farm earlier this year, which provided much of the money for the cougar cage. The wire mesh for the cage was donated as well, which saved Sebring almost \$19,000.

"I sold my car two months ago to buy poles for the cage, and my motorcycle a month before that," he said. "It's amazing how your values change. I mean, who needs a Porsche when they can have a pan-

ther?"


Sebring owns 30 acres, and ideally he would like to devote most of it to an educational and rescue facility for cougars. He envisions a facility that can sustain itself, rather than being constantly in need of money.

"I would like to devote my life to the preservation of cougars," Sebring said. "I'd like to educate people, stop people from having cougars as pets, or shooting them in the wild. People need to know that cougars aren't going to hurt them, and that they're something to be preserved."

From the 15 or so housecats that have adopted Sebring, to Tawni and the other cougars, he is surrounded by cats of every color and size, which lie in the shade of a wire mesh cage, swim in the river, and watch visitors curiously.

"I worked hard to be here," Sebring said. "I think this is my purpose in this life. Besides, I like walking around and having cats follow me."

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