

Local man rehabilitates, shelters cougars

□ Cougar Prevention Resources cares for cats until they can be transferred to zoos, wildlife parks

By Meg Dedolph
Oregon Daily Emerald

Ray Sebring likes cats.

Some are small - black and brown tabbies that slink through the tall grass and brambles at his rural Lane County home.

But nine are larger, nearly eight feet long from nose to tail, and combined, eat 2,200 pounds of raw meat each month.

The larger cats are cougars, which are often mistreated at human hands, either bred for the pet market and kept in captivity by unethical breeders, or hunted by ranchers who fear the cats are eating their livestock.

Sebring does neither; instead, he has spent nearly five years rehabilitating and sheltering cougars until they can be transferred to zoos or wildlife parks.

His rural Lane County farm is the home of Cougar Preservation Resources, which includes a 12,000-square-foot chain-link cage with nine surrounding cages that open onto the big cage.

There is also a smaller building Sebring uses as a nature center, with exhibits and films he shows to visiting groups.

The cats each live in their own cage, sleeping and sheltering themselves from the weather in a wooden den box.

Each cougar gets time alone each day in the large cage to exercise and play with toys, including bowling pins and basketballs.

"They'd fight if they were all in the same place at the same time," Sebring said. "I wouldn't want to find out what they'd do."

Even separated in their own cages, it's clear each cat has a distinct personality and set of idiosyncrasies.

"Tawni's the queen," Sebring said. "She'll go out of her cage and go yell at everybody, especially Levi and Kayaka."

Another cat, Czar, prefers women.

"He doesn't like men," Sebring said, "but if a woman calls him (into his cage), he'll go right in."

Czar was raised by another cougar rehabilitator in Washington and moved to Sebring's facility when a Washington home could not be found for him.

Czar was used to being brushed by his former handler and now refuses to groom his own neck, so Sebring is waiting for him to "adopt" one of the CPR volunteers who can brush him.

Besides working with animals that may have been mistreated, Sebring also works to educate people about cougars and cougar preservation.

Each of the cats is part of a 45- to 60-minute tour of the facility that Sebring gives to visiting groups, including Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts, and he and Tawni make presentations at schools and in front of groups from Portland to Eugene.



Musashi, a three-year-old male, born in a zoo in Granby Canada, recovering from a recent illness peers out of his den. Because of his dependency on humans, he will probably be captive for life.

Occasionally, Sebring finds himself investigating reports of livestock killings where cougars are suspected. He said the cats are usually not responsible; rather, dogs often are, and in some cases, the ranchers' own dogs.

There is an extra incentive for livestock owners if they can prove their animals were killed by a cougar because a tax credit is given for livestock killed by game animals.

"Whenever someone starts complaining about a cougar eating their livestock, it's like a disease," Sebring said. "Every animal that comes up lame or dies is blamed on a cougar."

In some cases, when a cougar is blamed for killing livestock and is shot, orphaned cubs are left behind. In 1991, near Dexter, a mother cougar and one of her cubs was shot, leaving behind Kayaka, now a two-year-old at CPR.

After hearing there might be an abandoned cub in the woods, Sebring searched for Kayaka for nearly a week without success.

The cub, near death from

dehydration, was finally found when "a friend went out and used her feminine charm to schmooze the guy who shot the kitten's mom," Sebring said.

Sebring is also working to ban the use of dogs to hunt cougars, as Kayaka's mother was hunted.

"If you could eliminate hound hunting in Oregon, you could eliminate a lot of cruelty to animals," Sebring said. "A guy sits in his pickup with a beer or whatever, there's a monitor that shows where the dogs are, he sees the dogs' heads go up, knows they've got the cougar up a tree, goes out and shoots it. There's nothing sportsmanlike about that."

In order to do this, animal conservationists formed the Oregon Bear and Cougar Coalition, an organization dedicated to banning both hound hunting and bear baiting in Oregon.

Jennifer Sachs, Sebring's office manager, said the coalition is seeking volunteers to help collect the 67,000 signatures needed by July to put the measure on the November 1994 ballot.



Ray Sebring shares a tender moment with one of his cougars.

Volunteers are a mainstay at CPR, because money is often a problem for Sebring and his cats.

Sebring recently sold his house in Eugene's south hills to buy construction materials for a new enclosure he is building, but the money from that sale is nearly gone.

"I'm going on faith," Sebring said.

Magazine articles in *Seven-*

teen and Northwest Parks and Wildlife brought in some inquiries as well as some money, and CPR volunteers have canvassed door-to-door and solicited memberships.

Even though much of Sebring's volunteer projects call for large groups, there is some work for individuals.

Christine Evans, a junior in environmental studies major at the University, started volunteering with Sebring two or three weeks ago after one of her professors invited Sebring and Tawni to his class.

Evans said she's always been interested in animal preservation and is glad Sebring puts so much effort into education.

"They're all great animals," she said. "Being around them and actually seeing them is so different from reading a passing article."

Evans said she trusts the animals and isn't afraid of them, even though her aunt cautioned her to "be careful" in a phone conversation the two of them had recently.

"I'd much rather have something happen to me in that circumstance than walking across the street," she said. "Bites and scratches are just part of the job."

In perhaps the largest job at CPR to date, Sebring is building a 3.5-acre enclosure, designed to represent a cougar's natural habitat as closely as possible.

Once finished, the cage will be used for rehabilitation purposes, to teach cougars how to hunt and survive in the wild again. Most of the cats Sebring handles have become so accustomed to humans they could not live on their own again.

When the cage is finished, Sebring plans to build a waterfall feeding into the natural pond and stock the area with fish and jack rabbits to give the cougars hunting practice. Fallen trees that hang over the pond will give the cougars a place to climb.

Right now, the cage is only outlined by metal poles driven into the ground at regular intervals. Most of the blackberry bushes that crawled across the ground have been cut off because the cats cannot negotiate blackberry vines very well.

A group of 26 students from Lewis and Clark College helped set the poles into the ground, and Sebring is hoping to interest a fraternity, sorority or some other club in helping with the cage's construction.

Sebring said the animals selected to be part of the release program will have no human contact at all; the buildings and other cougar cages will not be visible from the large cage, and outside noises, like those from cars, will be minimized.

"Release programs need a large natural environment and no human contact to be successful," Sebring said.

But until the cage is completed so cougars can learn to hunt and eventually return to the wild, Sebring will probably continue working odd construction jobs to help keep his cats fed and happy until they move on to another home.

"These cats are like my children," Sebring said. "I cry whenever any one of them leaves."