

Local big cat rescue center getting ready for grand opening

By
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The Tiger Preservation Center, located just south of Cave Junction, is preparing for a June 1 grand opening to launch a new educational program that emphasizes the plight of captive exotic wildlife and presents them in a manner that contrasts with how many game parks feature exotic predator species. Many of the center's big cats exhibit an unusually close bond with their handlers.

"We're the 'other side of wild' and we want to show the public how love begets love," said Bonnie Ringo, who started working with exotic wild animals when she was eight years old. "People are typically blown away after

witnessing the gentle hands-on interactions happening here."

"Some wildlife shows pander to the sensational and showcase these cats as all teeth and claws, highlighting just their hunting instincts and physical attributes," Ringo said. "But that's not a well-rounded view. At our place people won't hear much roaring or snarling, only 'chuffing' and gentle whisperings. There's lots of head rubbing and licking coming from our animals, who by choice, give back to us the kindness that we give them. A peaceful co-existence is key for our survival as well as theirs."

The center's method of working with these huge predators is all the more remarkable as many of the animals have been "horribly abused." Most of the cats arrive at the center hurt, sick, or starving, and they're typically

scared after enduring mistreatment at the hands of humans, according to Ringo.

Ringo rescues and then rehabilitates cats from backyard breeding operations and other "awful situations," often taking animals that others don't want or can't handle due to medical problems or serious aggression issues. Once healthy, she works to "re-home" them, thus making space at her center for more cats in trouble. Vetting potential homes closely, Ringo ensures that candidates have proper USDA licensing and a good facility. The center keeps the cats they cannot place in good homes.

"It's bad enough that they're stuck behind bars, in prison for life," Ringo said. "So we give them love and respect. We work with them gently and consistently to regain their trust and then help them live out their lives in a safe and secure place."

"It's an amazing gift from God that Bonnie has been given. Just to watch these animals respond to her — it's so beautiful," said center volunteer and Cave Junction resident Maggie Haskell. "What I see goes against everything we're programed to believe about these big cats. Not that they aren't potentially dangerous, but what she's personally able to do with them is awesome."

The federally licensed rehabilitation facility, whose primary mission is to provide sanctuary for injured and orphaned exotic wildlife, is home to about 30 animals: mostly tigers and a few lions, leopards, savannah cats and a serval. Also, there's some wolves, a lemur, a wallaroo and a very rare Icelandic horse who just had a baby.

Ringo and her husband, Bob, started working with big cats in earnest in 1991. Then in 1999, they bought the land for the center at 28057 Redwood Hwy. As county zoning requirements restrict locations for the housing of exotic animals, when Great Cats World Park moved to the Illinois Valley a few years later, that facility opened next-door to the center, but the two operations are not related.

The Ringo's look forward to providing the public with an "up close and personal experience" when the center opens in June. "Our educational tours will leave you with lasting memories of these great cats," said Ringo, who added that in addition to bringing attention to the conditions many exotic cats experience in captivity, the tour also educates the public about the critical issues that dwindling wild cat populations are facing world-wide due to habitat loss.

The center is the least expensive exotic wildlife attraction in the region, with an entrance fee of \$8 for adults, \$6 for seniors and \$4 for children under 12. School groups will be admitted free of charge. "Our goal is to make the experience affordable and to give something back to the community," Ringo said.

The center also has an "Adopt a Big Cat" program to help pay for food, medications and veterinarian bills that can get quite high. All donations are tax deductible and go directly to the care of the cat. Volunteers are always needed and report having amazing experiences at the center.

Located 1.4 miles south of Cave Junction, look for the center's large wooden sign. After June 1, the center will be open daily from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Call 541-592-6261 for more information.



Bonnie Ringo gives Ceaser her 17-year lion resident a bath at the center located on Hwy. 199. 1.4 miles south of C.J.

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