

Two orphaned cougars find new home at Oregon Zoo this year

Chinook and Takini faced an uncertain future until Michelle Schireman stepped in. The two orphaned cougar cubs were rescued by Schireman, the As-

sociation of Zoo and Aquariums' puma population manager and a keeper at the Oregon Zoo. The young cougars will make their debut at the Oregon

Zoo on August 4.

"I'm usually the first person fish and wildlife departments call when orphaned cubs or nuisance cats must be re-

moved from the wild," said Schireman. "I work with zoos across the country to find them new homes and offer game authorities an option besides euthanasia."

Chinook, the larger of the two cats at 45 pounds, was found in late January, underweight and scavenging for food in Sequim, Wash. Authorities at Washington State Game believe she is the cub of a cougar hit by a car in December. She was held at the Northwest Raptor Center in Sequim until she could be moved to Portland in late April.

Takini, the zoo's second cougar, was spotted in a tree observing a Rapid City, S.D., resident waxing his boat on Mother's Day. Officials with South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks, Wildlife Division darted the 35-pound cub with a tranquilizer. Schireman suggested the name Takini, which means survivor in the Lakota language of Native Americans. Takini arrived at the zoo May 18.

The cubs are believed to be about 9 to 10 months old.

The two female felines are becoming acquainted with one another behind the scenes, but will soon move to their new home, Cougar Crossing, the zoo's newest exhibit. The exhibit opens Friday, August 4, with grand opening activities slated for Saturday, Aug. 5.

Because there are many orphaned cubs in the wild, there has been a moratorium on cougar breeding in effect at all AZA-accredited zoos nationwide.

The zoo's Cougar Crossing can hold three cats, so it is possible that the zoo may serve as a foster home for cubs waiting for a permanent placement.

"I'm always looking for temporary homes for orphans," said Schireman. "If we can fill that role once in a while, that may save young cougars."

The cubs' new home is naturalistic and allows visitors a unique view into cougar habitat. Visitors enter the exhibit at the forested edge of Trillium Creek Family Farm, along a path that winds toward the first viewing area. The covered viewing structure, which resembles those seen in national parks, allows visitors to come within five or six feet of the cougars. One-eighth inch aircraft cable, strung vertically and taut, creates the animals' barrier. Visitors are kept back from the wire by a fence.

"Very little separates visitors from the cougars," says Oregon Zoo Director Tony Vecchio. "The design provides an unobstructed view."

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