

# Wild Things

## Lions and tigers as pets ... oh my

By Barbara Klein

As I round the bend of another Redstone Township country road, I can't help but notice a lion sitting on the hillside. This is no lawn ornament. This is an honest-to-goodness 300-pound African lion named Duke. "When Duke first came here he was walking bone," says William Sheperd, veterinarian and proprietor of the nonprofit Western Pennsylvania National Wild Animal Orphanage. "He hated everybody."

Who could blame him? According to Sheperd, Duke had spent his days and nights in a 6 x 12-foot cage locked away in a pet store. "The right side of his face is deformed," he adds. "I think they beat him."

"What's a pet store doing with a lion anyway?" I ask.

"Fifty dollars and a permit can get anyone a lion," he answers. "You can get a lion cub for less money than a Labrador retriever. These animals are in our cities. It would shock you to know where they are." He points to a cougar who was the pet of an exotic dancer. The pair prowled the streets of Pittsburgh's North Side until the police intervened.

When Duke was finally set free, his prospects of living — let alone happily ever after — were bleak. There simply aren't many places willing to take in a wayward lion. Zoos aren't interested, and neither is the gang from the old pride. Once an animal has been tainted by human contact, an orphanage is usually his last hope. But these safe havens are few and far between. Sheperd reports that he has found facilities in North Carolina and Texas, but his is the only one in these parts.

Duke is now one of 17 wild animals who call

the Fayette County orphanage home. The same 100 acres are also home to Sheperd; his wife, Rebecca; and their 8-year-old daughter, A.J. (Audrey Jean). Their modest house sits close to the road; behind it stands a stable. Originally built for horses (these creatures have been moved to new quarters on the property), the structure is currently occupied by the big cats. The stalls open to a dozen or so 40 x 70-foot outdoor pens. Enclosed by fences (a perimeter

fence serves as an added safety measure),

the berths have wires running across the tops. Big cats are

known to jump far and high.

"So what do your neighbors think of your choice of pets?" I ask. "They've never complained," he says. "Although they do tell me they hear the roaring."

What I hear is a low-level rumble (purring maybe) that almost makes the ground tremble.

### Right Where We Live

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It's not exactly a frightening sound. But it does let you know — in no uncertain terms — you're in the presence of a powerful force of nature. And nature abounds here. There are lions, tigers, cougars and bobcats, as well as the horses, some dogs, a few house cats, a guinea pig and a bird.

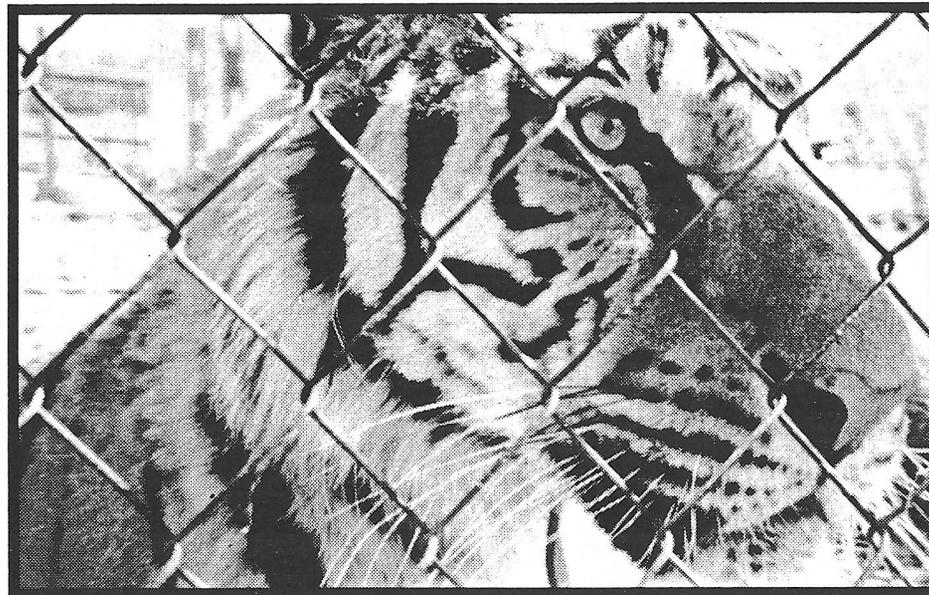


Photo by Karen Hellman

As Sheperd prepares to take me on a tour, a llama and goat (they're best friends) come charging. "Don't worry," the good doctor assures me. "They'll stop." I'm not sure why, but I believe him. Then Paco, the llama, does stop — to give me a kiss. I must confess I've never been kissed by a llama before. And I'm here to tell you it's not such a bad thing. Sheperd continues his rounds. "How you doing, Sabrina?"

the pens, he's had his share of close encounters with lions looking to assert their dominance and tigers seeking a new toy. "It usually hurts my feelings more than anything else," he says.

Speaking of meals, these beasts consume an entire cow every five days. Not to mention 1,200 pounds of chicken, 800 pounds of hamburger and 20 to 30 cases of Friskies (only mixed grill and turkey and giblets, thank you very much).

Sheperd has had more than a decade to discover the felines' favorite foods. It was back in 1988 that a cougar named Tabitha was brought in by the state game commission. She never left, and Sheperd's open-door policy was established. It's a way of life his family supports. "My wife is as bad as I am, if not worse," he says. "She's the one bottle-feeding them and staying up all night with them."

A vet for 15 years and counting, Sheperd heals the animals' wounds, which can be extensive, and pays for their upkeep, which can be expensive (about \$75,000 a year). He invests 10 to 12 hours a day at his practice and then attends to his furry charges at the orphanage. "I'd rather have the company of animals than some people," he says. Who could blame him? 

he inquires of the 400-plus-pound Siberian tiger. "How's daddy's girl?" She slinks over to the fence and stretches up, and up. She has the same playful mannerisms as my cats Buddy and Sally — with one notable difference. Her paws are bigger than my head. One swipe and I'd be dinner. Since Sheperd does venture into