

# Big Cat Country

At Turpentine Creek Wildlife Refuge, Africa comes to Arkansas

■ RICHARD & ELLEN THANE



PHOTO: SCOTT SMITH



**W**ild and savage, the roar is deafening. Like thunder, it rolls through the forest and sends shivers down our spines. It's feeding time deep in the Arkansas Ozarks — but the sound is

right out of Africa, created by more than a hundred big cats anticipating supper. I mean *really* big cats: lions, tigers, cougars, ligers, panthers, bobcats ... and they're all hungry. Turpentine Creek Wildlife



The emphasis at Turpentine Creek is on providing refuge for abused and abandoned big cats. The facility is constantly adding habitats (top) that closely match the cats' natural surroundings. Visitors can watch as the staff interacts with many of the refuge's residents, including cougars and llamas (above).

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Refuge, one of the largest of its kind in the world open to the public, is located seven miles south of Eureka Springs, Arkansas, on State Highway 23. We picked up one of their brochures at the Eureka Springs Visitor Center promising big cats and, being cat lovers, decided to go. What an experience — The \$12 dollar per-person entry fee was worth every penny!

It all started when Tanya Smith and her parents, Don and Hilda Jackson, of Hughes Springs, Texas, rescued a tiny, neglected lion cub. Unfortunately, they soon found that there was no one they could turn this little animal over to; their choices were to keep it or have it killed — and, as animal lovers, option number two was never really an option at all. Still, neither Don nor Hilda ever expected their love of that one cat to grow into anything, until someone else approached them with another lion cub that needed a home.

Don had some zoo experience and, after much thought and research, the family decided to take the enormous step of opening a wild animal refuge center. Tanya purchased 459 acres in the Ozarks, a choice made partially because she and her parents loved the area but also because it is the home of Tyson Foods — and this giant food company, with its numerous chicken ranches in Arkansas, had promised to donate large quantities of meat.

Together with her husband, Scott, Tanya and her family opened the refuge in 1992. From a family operation, it has grown to a paid staff of about 16 who handle the facility together with biologists and zoologists from all over the world who come to serve as interns for temporary periods. College students studying animal sciences also spend spring and summer breaks helping out. Today, Turpentine Creek has 118 big cats — and receives about 100 calls a year from people wanting them to take in more. A number of local sources have joined Tyson in helping with the enormous

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food requirements.

The mission statement for this non-profit Department of Agriculture-licensed facility is “To provide lifetime refuge for abandoned, abused and neglected big cats, with emphasis on tigers, lions, leopards and cougars.” They offer a lifetime home and sanctuary for these wonderful wild beasts. A further goal of the refuge center is to “help cease the breeding and trading of exotic animals in this country.” Most of these animals have been rescued from illegal breeders and from people who buy big cats as cuddly babies — only to find that they can’t handle them as they grow up.

According to Tanya, if more cities would ban the ownership of exotic pets it would eliminate this sad situation. In the meantime, places like Turpentine Creek provide a home for these big cats; with their care, the animals often live longer than they would in the wild — sometimes up to 20 years.

Safety is a prime consideration at the facility, for visitor and resident alike. Double-fencing keeps visitors more than an arm’s length away from the cages and habitats, preventing anyone from acting upon the almost overwhelming temptation to reach out and touch the animals. Golden-eyed lions and tigers greeted us majestically as we passed their cages. Kenny Rogers, a white Bengal tiger with a face like a bulldog (the result of inbreeding), charmed us as he rolled over and wanted his belly rubbed. Beautiful Vada, a black Indian leopard, stared regally as we walked by. Llamas and deer, caged right beside the big cats, show no fear as if they know the fences keep them safe. The refuge also has several bears, which have their own quarters.

Though the animals are initially housed in cages, the Turpentine Creek staff and a host of volunteers (mostly church groups and college students), are building natural habitats as rapidly as money and manpower will allow. It is a wonderful experience to be able

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to get up close and watch the big cats run and frolic through the tall grass and trees in an area that more closely matches their natural surroundings. With toys, treats and affection, the staff makes a great effort to provide for the emotional as well as the physical well-being of each animal. Several of the more docile cats seem to enjoy being used in photo shoots and making television and educational appearances.

During our visit, there were 56 tigers that needed rescuing from a questionable facility in another state. Tanya, Scott and family were scrambling to take as many of the cats as they could. In the end, Turpentine Creek managed to take 21 of the cats — and found a place in Tennessee for the others.

Before venturing to Turpentine Creek, it's recommended that visitors log onto the refuge's Web site and learn the stories about many of the individual animals. The refuge depends on donations and volunteers as well as admission fees to maintain their animal rescue; you may join other families in "adopting" an animal, if you wish.

For visitors, several bed-and-breakfast rooms are available at Turpentine Creek, and 10 RV spots (with full hookups) have just been completed; there also are other campsites in nearby Eureka Springs. The new sites allow RVers to stay on the property, next to the lion cages — and listen to them as they carol through the night. ■

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