

WILD THING

Who can own restricted animals? Just about anyone



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photos

ABOVE: Sita, a bobcat saved by American Wildlife Rescue Service in Scotts Valley, eyes owner Jeanne Milewski's grandson, Erik Arratia. **BELOW:** A red-tail hawk glares from its cage at the rescue center.

Breeders, shelters, exhibitors can be licensed to keep restricted wildlife

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Animals

SCOTTS VALLEY — It's not every day that a big cat claws its way onto the front page.

But this past month, both lions and tigers appeared front and center, in local and national newspapers around the country.

In Scotts Valley, a tiger jumped a 6-year-old boy at a school-sponsored exhibition. The child's head had to be wrested from its mouth.

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NICOLE PAQUETTE,
ANIMAL PROTECTION
INSTITUTE

And in Arkansas, four 600- to 800-pound African lions escaped from a local exotic animal farm near the town of Quitman, leaving residents afraid to go outside their homes. All four cats were shot and killed by Quitman residents and the Cleborne County Sheriff's Office.

Large exotic animals can be found in every state, according to Nicole Paquette of the Animal Protection Institute, a private animal rights advocacy group based in Sacramento.

"There are more tigers in the United States than there are in their natural Asian habitats," Paquette said.

Most of these animals are owned by private citizens, businesses and foundations. And while it is illegal to own exotic animals as pets in California, it is possible to get licenses to exhibit, breed or shelter them.

And, according to Paquette, the provisions required to get such licenses are surprisingly lax — even though California is reput-



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ed to have some of the strictest laws concerning restricted animals in the country — animals the state considers exotic or wild.

To get the state's permission to buy an animal for exhibition, an applicant needs to show documentation of the following four things:

- Approval from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and unhindered access to federal agents for inspection of the animals and the property.

- Age (You must be at least 18).

- A minimum of two years full-time animal handling.

- At least one year handling the kind of animal to be bought.

State permits range from \$289.50 for residents, to \$579 for nonresidents and must be renewed annually. The state Department of Fish and Game can revoke a license at any time if it believes the animals are not being taken care of properly.

For instance, an exhibitor who showed armadillos would need to provide each single-housed ant-eating South African mammal with a 200-square-foot enclosure, at least 8 feet from floor to ceiling.

Same thing goes for licensees who exhibit chipmunks. In this case, a 20-square-foot habitat, that provided at least 6 feet of headway, would be required for each solitary housed rodent.

The requirements for public display, however, are not so clear. According to Fish and Game, an animal "must be handled so there is no perceived risk to the public ... with sufficient distance allowed between animal acts and the viewing public to assure safety to both the public and the animals."



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

A wolf hybrid paces its home in Scotts Valley, at American Wildlife Rescue Service.

So whether the tiger implicated in the Scotts Valley incident was handled properly by its owners, Zoo to You of Paso Robles, remains a judgment call by the state.

As of 2001, 138 California residents and 39 nonresidents held exhibition permits to house restricted animals, according to Fish and Game. And 18 permits were issued by the state to establishments holding restricted native species — mountain lions, bobcats, deer, etc.

The numbers for Santa Cruz County were unavailable. And according to Tricia Geisreiter, animal services coordinator for Santa Cruz County, people owning restricted or exotic animals are not required to register with the county.

"The closest thing we've had to exotic

is a couple of people who've come in to surrender their pet ferrets," said Geisreiter, who has worked been working with county Animal Services for more than 15 years.

Shannon Thomas, a vet who specializes in exotic animal care at the Santa Cruz Veterinary Hospital, said she is unaware of restricted animals in the county.

"I've heard that these back yard operations are out there, but I don't have any firsthand experience with them," she said. "My guess is that they don't use vets with exotic animal backgrounds. We are just too expensive."

And Jackie Gai, a veterinarian affiliated with the Performing Animal Welfare Society, in Galt, concurred.

"We (exotic animal veterinarians) are

a pretty small community, and I don't know anybody personally who works with these kinds of establishments," she said.

There is at least one place in Santa Cruz County that houses restricted animals — American Wildlife Rescue Service Inc., 1296 Conference Drive, Scotts Valley.

The Rescue Service, owned and operated by Jeanne Milewski, is home to a bobcat, two wolf hybrids, a red-tailed hawk and hundreds of bird species on its 10 acres.

"When I moved here in 1967, there was no one around who would help all the injured animals on the sides of the roads," she said.

Feeling compelled to heal, she brought the ailing creatures to her home.

Since then, she has housed hundreds of injured and neglected animals, including a 500-pound, 8-foot-long African lion and an adult black panther.

"People bought these cats as pets — and they got to be too much trouble. That's when we took them," she said.

But, she sympathizes with Zoo to You, the company that owns the tiger that stole headlines across the nation, when its tiger attacked a boy in a Scotts Valley school auditorium last month.

"We, too, used to bring animals to schools. And there was this one time that we brought one of our wolves," she said.

The wolf, which was being shown to a large group of kids in an auditorium, was on a stage, "at a very safe distance," she said.

When the principal announced that it was lunch time, the kids mobbed the stage. The canine broke loose and darted out the back door.

"Sometimes it's just impossible to plan for everything," she said.

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