

## Lions and Tigers and Cars, Oh My!

In some states, your name doesn't have to be Siegfried or Roy for keeping big cats to be perfectly legal

BY ALEXANDRA KLEINKOPF



Following eight reported attacks, the USDA revoked the license of the Ohio group caring for this lion and several other large cats. Big Cat Rescue and World Animal Orphanage took in the felines. TIM LAVER

"A lion?" The 911 dispatcher's voice stung with skepticism.

"It's a lion," the caller insisted. "It stands and, like, attacks someone's car!"

It wasn't a typical morning commute for the numerous Pike County drivers who called in to report the 550-pound feline chasing cars on Ohio's Route 23 last November.

According to first responder and humane agent John Owens of the Pike County Ohio Humane Society, Lambert the lion managed to escape from his cage by pulling down a wooden beam and breaking the enclosure.

But that cage wasn't in a zoo. Lambert and another lion named Lacy have been privately owned by local resident Terry Brumfield since they were cubs. While most states prohibit individuals from owning big cats, Ohio and a handful of others allow it, without even requiring a permit.

"I don't know why people have lions, but the law says they can," says Owens.

It's a law that can put a dangerous burden on field staff trained and equipped to handle domestic animals. The tranquilizer gun of a local dog warden was too small to sedate the lion, so Brumfield's brother—who also keeps exotic pets—was called upon for his 10 cc tranquilizer gun. Had a larger tranquilizer not been available, Lambert might have been shot by authorities.

Once Brumfield had recaptured Lambert, Owens constructed a new cage for the lions, and various responders helped fix up the property to meet state regulations for housing wildlife. The lions appeared healthy, Owens says, and once their living conditions had been brought up to legally acceptable standards, Pike County Humane felt there was no reason to seize them.

But according to Dean Vickers, Ohio state director for The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), exotic pet owners are rarely able to meet the needs of the animals involved. Proper nutrition, exercise, living space, and stimulation are often severely lacking. Describing an ongoing case of five tigers now living in their owner's basement, he says that the animals, who normally roam for miles in the wild, spend their days in "glorified dog cages."

Just days before Lambert got loose, a pet tiger in Iowa was shot and killed by authorities after escaping his cage and mauling a collie. Iowa had just passed a bill to prohibit big cats and other wild animals as pets, but Ohio still has no such law.

The United States Department of Agriculture, which oversees commercial activity such as zoos, does not oversee pets at all; and the Ohio Department of Natural Resources concentrates on native species, leaving no one to regulate exotic pets. "I can see where they're coming from, but *someone* has to regulate them," Vickers

says—since keeping dangerous exotic animals is "a major public safety issue."

According to Beth Preiss, exotic pet campaign manager at The HSUS, at least 11 people have been killed by captive big cats in the U.S. since 2001, including a teenager who was mauled by a tiger at the San Francisco Zoo. "If a tiger can escape from an accredited zoo, it's no surprise lions and tigers escape when kept by individuals," Preiss says.

Communities like Mount Hope, Ohio, serve as literal breeding grounds for exotic animals, Vickers explains. Mount Hope hosts exotic pet auctions three times a year, where anyone with \$300 to \$600 can purchase a lion cub ... without having to show that they can provide for the animal or protect the public when the cub grows up. "I don't think [people] realize how big they get, and how much maintenance they're going to be," Vickers says, adding that many of these cats wind up at roadside zoos, canned hunting facilities, or in a cramped cage.

Though the federal Captive Wildlife Safety Act prohibiting interstate transport of exotic cats by individual pet owners took effect last September, the law does not prohibit or regulate owning large cats. Vickers and others are now working with the Ohio state legislature to pass House Bill 45, which would impose stricter housing requirements on owners and make it harder for them to get exotic animals.

"Sadly, it may take another death—probably a high-profile death—for people to appreciate the need for the bill," Vickers says.

In the meantime, while Lambert remains cooped up in his cage, Ohio residents can breathe easier ... until the next jungle creature heads for their highways. **AS**