

Two roaming cougars back in cages

[2 LATE TAMPA Edition]

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Two domesticated cougars that escaped from a north Tampa wildlife facility were recaptured Monday and taken home, wildlife experts said.

Officials were deciding Tuesday whether to cite the owners, who manage Wildlife on Easy Street near Sheldon Road and Gunn Highway.

The South American cougars became the subject of a search after they escaped from their pens around 7:30 a.m. Monday.

One of the animals was captured within an hour. But officials searched more than 12 hours for the second, 80-pound cat before it was eventually sighted about 11 p.m. Monday in the area where it escaped.

Don and Carole Lewis house more than 100 cats, including lions and tigers, at the state-permitted facility, said Lt. Rip Stalvey, public information officer for the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission.

Though one cougar remained loose Monday night, Lewis denied to a reporter that his cat was missing. The Lewises did not return calls Tuesday.

Because the cougars are tame and have been declawed, authorities said residents were probably not at risk.

"I don't think there was any danger because this is a cat that was hand-raised by people," Stalvey said.

Jean Carson was in her yard cutting weeds Monday when she heard that one of the Lewises' cougars was loose.

"I just kept on working," said Carson, 65. "That'll give you an idea of how scared I was."

Carson, who has lived on Easy Street since 1964, said this was the first time, to her knowledge, that any of the Lewises' animals have escaped. She figures it was a low-flying helicopter hovering overhead recently that drove the cougar away.

Stalvey said the second cougar was discovered outside the Lewises' fenced, 40-acre compound. It escaped from a 40-by-80-foot pen. Both cats were returned to Lewis scared but uninjured, Stalvey said.

Wildlife officials said the Lewises may be cited for unsafe housing permitting the escape of the cougar, a misdemeanor.

In June, the World Society for the Protection of Animals gave Wildlife on Easy Street poor marks for living and safety conditions.

Carson, the neighbor, complimented the Lewises' operation.

"I feel like they (the Lewises) are being crucified on some of this stuff," Carson said. "For crying out loud, this is a tame cougar. This isn't one of your . . . beasties that just came from the wild. If people cared for their children the way he takes care of those animals, the whole world would be a lot better off." - Times staff writer Erika Duckworth contributed to this report.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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