

## ***Second Nature***

By Brenda Schory, Northwest Herald

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MARENGO—A month-old opossum, barely bigger than a gerbil, peered between Lynda Sugasa's fingers as she cupped the tiny creature in her hand.

Its mother was killed by a car, and Sugasa is raising a litter of four orphans. A few minutes later, Sugasa cooed to a tawny 190-pound cougar named Montana as he walked on saucer-sized paws through a sun-dappled enclosure.

Montana, or Monty, limps slightly, a permanent injury from being shot as a two-month cub in Montana.

"I think they deserve a second chance," Sugasa said.

For all types of creatures, Sugasa's Safe Haven Wildlife Refuge Center in Marengo is a haven. Some stay temporarily until they heal or grow up enough to return to nature. Others, mostly former exotic pets, will stay the rest of their lives at the center because they are too injured or don't have the skills to survive in their native habitat.

Sugasa, 47, of Marengo, said she and her husband, David, started caring for animals in 1999, but incorporated the sanctuary as a nonprofit agency in 2000.

The refuge, which takes in several hundred animals a year, lies on 5 acres in a rural area outside Marengo and operates under a conditional zoning permit from McHenry County. The operation runs on the generosity of time and money from volunteers.

Sugasa is very hands-on, but she relies on a dozen volunteers to help. They feed and medicate animals, clean cages, and do activities so permanently captive animals—such as Monty—can have mental stimulation.

Ann and Richard Alderson, a retired couple from Woodstock, do all that and participate in releases of rehabbed animals.

"This is a wonderful place to volunteer and learn a lot about animals," Ann Alderson said.

Jan Pitsch of Bull Valley said Safe Haven also was a good place to bring injured or orphaned wild creatures, such as the tiny furless baby squirrel she brought to the sanctuary's door earlier this year.

"The animals we've taken over there are not just victims of nature," Pitsch said. "They

were injured by causes of man. If we are going to infringe on their habitat, don't we have responsibility?"

Part of that responsibility is financial, as Safe Haven pays about \$45,000 a year for food and veterinary bills. For that, Sugasa relies on donations and fundraisers, such as an upcoming golf outing later this month.

Sugasa also looks to veterinarian Glen Redeker of Spring Hill Veterinary Clinic in Carpentersville.

"I never dreamt I'd be doing this after 36-plus years in practice," Redeker said of treating sedated cougars. "She [Sugasa] is doing a service to allow them to live out their lives in as good a situation as possible."

Outdoor enclosures house four cougars, a bobcat, and one each of Arctic, silver and red foxes. They cannot be returned to the wild because of injury, or because they were kept illegally as pets or in petting zoos and have no survival skills.

Phoenix, a bobcat native to the southwest, was declawed and kept as a pet in an apartment in Crystal Lake.

Tahoe, another cougar, was part of a roadside zoo. Juno, an Arctic fox was an illegal pet confiscated from a house in McHenry County.

Though it is illegal to keep an Arctic fox as a pet, they are currently a fad, Sugasa said.

"They're cute. Then they start to urinate and smell and stink," Sugasa said. "They become more aggressive as they mature and they [the owners] realize they can't handle it. And then where does it go? The zoos won't take them. So it's either places like us or they are euthanized ... or people dump them."

Part of Safe Haven's mission is to advocate for laws to stop abuse and exploitation of exotic animals. Toward that end, Sugasa wishes people would just show some compassion and common sense and stop trying to make pets out of wild animals -- and stop exploiting them for entertainment.

"We must have turned away 50 animals this year for permanent placement -- tigers and lions and cougars and so on," Sugasa said. "The day Cooper [a cougar] arrived, we had a call for five more cougars in Illinois...and we had to say no."