

***Animal refuge headed west:
A McHenry County rescue center will leave for a bigger spread in Nevada,
straining resources for injured critters in the Chicago area***

By Robert Channick, Special to the Chicago Tribune

September 28, 2006

The listing for Lynda Sugasa's colonial home on 5 wooded acres near Marengo includes four bedrooms, a two-car garage, cathedral ceilings and a deck. But a distinctive, unadvertised back-yard amenity is proving to be the highlight of open houses: a 4,000-square-foot enclosure patrolled by four cougars.

The omission is not an oversight; the enclosure and its inhabitants are not for sale. Next year, they'll be hitting the road along with four foxes, a bobcat and her husband, David, when Sugasa relocates the not-for-profit Safe Haven Wildlife Center to 160 acres in Imlay, Nev.

"It's just getting too developed here for us," said Sugasa, 47, a New Jersey native who moved to McHenry County in 1996 and turned her home into a state-licensed wildlife-rehabilitation facility six years ago, funded by donations.

The imminent loss of Safe Haven—along with the cessation this year of services at the Cook County Forest Preserve's Trailside Museum in River Forest and Itasca's Spring Brook Nature Center—leaves only three wildlife rescue facilities in the Chicago area.

"We've lost significant capacity in this market, and we already weren't servicing the number of animals that needed help," said Dawn Keller, who runs Flint Creek Wildlife Rehabilitation in Barrington and Chicago.

With her center projected to treat more than 2,000 birds and animals this year, Keller hopes to expand her not-for-profit operation, but said "funding isn't keeping pace."

The situation is even more dire for the Fox Valley Wildlife Center in Elburn, where a funding shortfall will force the facility to close its doors over the winter for the second year in a row.

"We're on the brink of extinction ourselves," said Bryan Kimmell, president of the not-for-profit center, which treats about 2,000 animals each year.

Safe Haven's departure only compounds the problem, Kimmell said.

"There's no safety net for wildlife," he said.

Although the remaining facilities, including Willowbrook Wildlife Center in Glen Ellyn, may eventually pick up the slack among indigenous species, the prognosis for exotic

animals is not so bullish.

Started as a rehabilitation clinic for orphaned and injured mammals, Sugasa's facility treats several hundred each year in a heated 24-by-36-foot steel building behind her house, all with an eye toward returning native species to the wild. Current patients include a chipmunk, a squirrel and a handful of baby opossums.

Sugasa's operation expanded from hospital to haven in 2003 after she received a license from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which regulates the handling of exotic wildlife for exhibition, breeding and transportation.

Sugasa's first full-time resident was Phoenix, a declawed 28- pound bobcat that had been living in a Crystal Lake apartment. It subsisted on Friskies, and a propensity to mark its turf ultimately put McHenry County Animal Control on the cat's tail.

"She was confiscated because she was urinating all over the apartment and the smell drove the other tenants to call and complain about it," Sugasa said.

Bigger cats soon followed, starting with Tahoe and Savannah, a pair of nearly 200-pound cougars evicted from a closed roadside zoo in New Hampshire that found refuge in one of two adjacent runs in Sugasa's fenced enclosure.

In 2004 Sugasa took in Monty, a cougar cub from Montana that was crippled by a gunshot. Later that year she found a cagemate in Cooper, which was orphaned at two weeks and raised briefly by a family in his native Washington state.

"They're best friends," said Sugasa of the normally solitary animals. "Each has his own den, but they prefer to sleep together."

A smaller, separate enclosure houses Serena, a disabled red fox; Sydney, a silver fox from the shuttered Santa's Village amusement park; and Juno, an arctic fox confiscated from a McHenry County home last year. A 6-month-old red fox, nursed back to health from a life-threatening battle with mange, is the last animal slated to join the pack before its westward trek.

Since becoming a nationally accredited sanctuary in 2004, Safe Haven has been inundated with calls from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the USDA and local agencies looking to place everything from tigers to alligators. With no room to expand, Sugasa has turned away 50 wild animals in the last year, prompting the purchase of a large spread at the foot of the Humboldt Mountains, northeast of Reno.

Pending sale of their home, Sugasa hopes to be able to relocate by spring. With volunteer help, she plans to lead a caravan of three trailers more than 1,700 miles, with the animals separated by species to minimize backseat squabbles.

With the nearest accredited big-cat sanctuary in Minnesota, the next apartment-dwelling

bobcat may face a long road to find a new home.

"If needed, we can always contact Lynda in Nevada and place it there," said Dr. Edin Mehanovic, administrator of McHenry County Animal Control. "I just hope we don't have to go that far."

(Copyright 2006 by the Chicago Tribune)