

Mufasa's Pride

Mebane's Conservator's Center is Home to a Special Group of Cats



photo by Chariot Creative

by Mandy Matson



Mufasa's condition has greatly improved since his arrival in Mebane.

VISITORS TO the Conservators' Center are often charmed by Mufasa Lion and his lionesses: Sadie, Kiara, and Ugmo. From a distance – when they're wrestling, playing tag, or napping – they are clearly a content and carefree family. But when Mufasa ambles over to greet his admirers they can see the scars he acquired at his previous home.

Mufasa's pride was living with a large number of other big cats at a breeding mill in Ohio that had been charged with more than 981 violations of the Animal Welfare Act. Mufasa and his pride were housed in a 400-square-foot enclosure that lacked adequate shelter from the winter cold and summer sun. Shared walls with other cages allowed male lions from different prides to fight through the fencing, and cage mates fought amongst themselves over food. All of the animals had multiple festering wounds.

The owner was repeatedly cited for unsafe and

unsanitary conditions, neglecting to provide veterinary care, and for keeping incompatible animals confined together in small spaces. The local county health department ruled that the facility was in violation of its codes, and that conditions posed a risk to the surrounding community. They gave the owner a strict timeline to remove the animals – or euthanize them.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) was asked to help find homes for the animals. The Conservators' Center, an exotic animal facility in Mebane, was among the organizations contacted. The Conservators' Center – a nonprofit that does not receive any government funding – agreed to rescue four tigers, which would more than double their big cat population.

"The condition of those cats turned my stomach, and the situation made me angry," says Mindy Stinner, executive director of the Conservators' Center. "We had not planned to acquire more big cats at that time because of the expense, but we simply couldn't turn our backs on these horribly abused animals. We felt morally obligated to do whatever we could to rescue those we felt we could reasonably manage."

Another sanctuary owner asked the Conservators' Center to hold an additional ten lions and tigers while he relocated and built cages. The two facilities agreed that the center would temporarily house the cats in quarantine cages paid for by the other facility. The Conservators' Center bought the fencing on credit and volunteers helped build the enclosures.

JUST BEFORE THE BIG CATS arrived, the owner of the other facility fell deathly ill, and his heirs did not honor the financial agreement. The Conservators' Center had to absorb the cost of the fencing and was now obliged to keep all 14 cats.

All of the males were vasectomized soon after their arrival, but four of the females arrived pregnant and gave birth to 15 cubs. Within one year, the center's big cat population exploded from three tigers to more than 30 lions and tigers. When Stinner explored options for placing the cubs at other facilities, the only ones that showed interest wanted them for commercial purposes that could have harmed the cubs and would not have provided them permanent homes.

The financial strain from this unexpected growth is still evident today as the Center continues to raise funds to move all of the big cats into larger enclosures. Although every cat is comfort-

ably housed, Stinner insists that with only ten of their 45 acres now developed, the center can provide even more space for their residents; and, eventually, for others in need of rescue.

MUFASA IS THE GRAND OLD gentleman of the Conservators' Center's lion prides. When he arrived he was underweight, riddled with parasites, and covered in sores and scars from fighting. With good care and plenty of food he quickly healed and slowly gained weight.

Although he is now quite elderly, Mufasa is still active and interested in the world around him. He is gentle and loving to his three female companions, enjoys visitors, and can't resist the enrichment the Center's staff and volunteers offer him.

A few years after Mufasa's pride arrived at the Conservators' Center, a generous donor provided funds to move them into a large, natural habitat. Mufasa was amazed by his new den box, which is referred to as "The Cadillac of Lion Homes." This three-room, insulated house has offset doors to shield the occupants from winter winds, and a roomy deck that is positioned to allow the pride to observe their neighbors.

Abused animals are resilient. A casual observer would never imagine that cats rescued from such dire circumstances could ever trust humans again. But everyone has blossomed with the devoted care and attention they now receive. They enjoy human interaction so much that many of the center's big cats mosey over to the fence to greet their admirers. Visitors are awed by the opportunity to see lions and tigers at little more than an arm's length away. Touching, however, is not permitted – a rule that is strictly enforced to ensure everyone's safety.

Mufasa's pride has settled into a happy routine. You can often find them lounging on their large deck. Each has a favorite spot for sunning, and a preferred napping place in the shade of the tree-filled habitat. Staff and volunteers talk to them in dotting tones.

"The Conservators' Center is the home of last resort for the animals we've rescued," says Stinner. "When I'm visiting our elderly residents, such as Mufasa, I think of this as their retirement home. Our goal is to provide them a place to live out their lives in peace, with nutritious food, great medical care, and the adoration they deserve." 🐾



Doug Evans and Mindy Stinner, co-founders of the Conservators' Center photo by Robbie Pope

Want to Meet Mufasa?

THE CONSERVATORS' CENTER is home to the largest collection of lions in the Southeast. The center's 21 lions and 11 tigers attract visitors fascinated by these predaceous felines. Although most visitors are drawn to the center for the thrill of seeing big cats up close, many leave talking about other species in the eclectic collection that includes wolves, New Guinea singing dogs, lemurs, binturongs, servals, caracals, bobcats, jungle cats, and a lynx.

The lifeblood of the center is a community of people committed to caring for almost 100 animals. With a very small staff, they depend on volunteers and interns to supply much of the labor; and on visitors, donors, and lifetime adopters to help fund their continuing growth.

You can learn more about the Conservators' Center and how to donate at www.conservatorscenter.org – you can read about the animals, sign up for a free e-newsletter, link to the center's Facebook pages (be sure to check out Arthur White Tiger's page, which is great fun to read), and find a way to get involved.

MANY TOURS ARE AVAILABLE and must be scheduled in advance. The tours are targeted to a range of interests. Here's a sampling of what you can experience:

Public Tour:

Meet the animals, learn about their behaviors, and hear the individual rescue stories.

Treat Feeding and Enrichment Tour:

See some of the center's most popular animals receive food treats and enjoy enrichment items.

Shadow the Keepers Tour:

Get a behind-the-scenes peek at what it takes to care for these incredible animals.

Twilight Tour:

View the center's nocturnal species and the big cats when they are most active.

Photography Tours:

Capture great wildlife shots with the help of a personal escort.

AT A GLANCE:

LOCATION: 25 minutes north of Mebane

VISIT: by appointment

PHONE: 336 421 0883

EMAIL: tours@conservatorscenter.org

WEBSITE: www.conservatorscenter.org

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