

## Wildlife on Easy Street

A non-profit big cat sanctuary

by Carole Lewis

It has been four heart wrenching hours that the little darling of Easy Street has been in surgery. We are all praying, all waiting breathlessly for word as two veterinarians and a staff of technicians hover around the stainless steel table. The life of one of the sweetest little cougars ever to chirp his way into my heart lays motionless before me and I feel helpless. He had been so sick with a nondescript virus that I had thought surely would cost him his life. One day he was healthy and mischievous, the next he wasn't eating and by the third day he had a feeding tube installed in his esophagus and was having series of shots throughout the day and night to battle the infection and slow the vomiting. Every day he looked worse instead of better. X-rays had been negative, blood tests weren't of much more help and every day he was hating the shots more and more. Finally he took a turn for the better and began eating on his own. We removed the feeding tube and were thrilled to be on the road to recovery.

Again he stopped eating. He was rushed back to the vet and the feeding tube was reinstalled. We were scolded by our vet for removing the first tube because each insertion would cause scarring that could lead to constriction. Again all of the shots, the pills, the bags and bags of fluids that he had to endure. We were more cautious as he improved this time and left the tube in place long after he

was back to eating like his old self. Aggressive isn't even descriptive enough to convey the flying food when he would attack the plate. He had always been that way since arriving here.



Before he got sick, Fleetwood and his sister Enya were out of their cages more than they were in them. They spent many nights a week with cabin guests and were always out doing events, riding in the car or walking around the yard. I left them suited up in their harnesses most of the time. It was easy to hook them up, but they spent so much time on the go, it was more convenient to leave them on. They got so much handling and petting by so many people in the course of the day that I never worried about the harness getting too tight or rubbing the skin.

Now I was sure he was over this insidious virus that has struck almost every cougar here. I hadn't lost any of them to it, but it had been borderline in almost every case before they got better. These two cubs were only six months old when it hit them and there were several nights in the worst of it that I would get up fully expecting them to be dead. Now it was over. Enya had overcome the virus much more quickly and had been back to running and romping for about a week, when I finally felt Fleetwood was ready to go back into the same cage with her. He walked to his new pen that had just been built while he was sick. It was over 1200 square feet of trees and vines and bushes and Enya! He had the greatest time. About six hours later one of the workers called me and said she thought Fleetwood was choking. He was crying and gagging, but I couldn't see anything in his mouth or lodged in his throat. Again he was rushed back to the vet.

Many x-rays later with no results the vet decided to open him up and in addition to peritonitis, they discover that his intestines are laced and permeated with purple nylon and worst of it is a rupture where the harness buckle he has swallowed has burst through the intestinal wall, causing massive internal bleeding. For hours they cut away at the tangle of 3/4 inch nylon that has frayed and spread like a cancer through his little gut. I have raised hundreds of cats and never had I seen one chew its harness off. I had never seen Fleetwood

even seen to notice that his wasn't a part of him. The day I found the purple harness all chewed up, I just assumed that Enya had helped him out of it. I didn't notice the buckle was missing as I threw away the slobbery remains. I have no one to blame but myself.

I could have insisted that every time they went anywhere the harnesses would immediately come off when they returned. It would not have taken more than a few seconds to safe guard him against the pain and the danger he now faces. The style of harness I use has the plastic quick connects because they are so much more convenient than the traditional metal buckle. They really aren't safe. I've had a lot of cats unsnap them, but my cats are so docile it has never been a big deal. It is another case though where convenience has compromised safety. What if there were a loud car backfire or some other unexpected thing that would cause a well mannered cat to bolt? I could be agonizing over a car and cat collision right now. The plastic quick connect did not show on the x-ray when he first got sick, nor now. Had he swallowed a metal buckle, we would have spotted it weeks before. This also goes to show that cats who will spit out perfectly good food will swallow things like harnesses, toys, sticks, rocks and you name it and we have pulled it out of a cat's stomach. You can never be too careful nor too paranoid when you are dealing with an exotic cat. I am thankful that I didn't have to learn this lesson at the cost of this dear one's life.