

Aug. 26, 2009

Training to handle 'exotic' 911 calls

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A firefighter answering a false fire alarm at the home of Zuzana Kukol and Scott Shoemaker recently got a startling surprise: Bam Bam, a 500-pound lion, was sitting on top of a playhouse in a large cage, looking at her.

That led to plans for a tour to familiarize firefighters with the residents of their 10-acre property in a remote part of Pahrump Valley.

A group of several firefighters last Friday stood nervously right at the front gate before going on a tour.

A hot wire around the top of the perimeter fence keeps the animals inside, a hot wire around the bottom of the fence on the outside keeps neighborhood animals out, Shoemaker explained.

"One caution we do have, we got snakes out here. That's a bigger concern than these guys are," he told firefighters.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture wants a perimeter fence or a double fence around the animals. Shoemaker says they have both.

When Kukol walked into the cage to meet Bam Bam, Shoemaker stood outside with a can of pepper spray. Kukol had a wire brush, Shoemaker said the animals get accustomed to being brushed with it and it makes a handy item to shove down his throat if Bam Bam decides to bite.

"It's just the sheer size of the animal that makes them dangerous. If he wants to play, it will come running up to you, but that's 500 pounds running up to you. Us as owners, we teach them real young not to jump on us and not to bite us," Shoemaker said.

Shoemaker suggested if necessary, firefighters could use a CO2 fire extinguisher to spray at the animals, to distract them and push them away. A blow horn is also useful to divert their attention, he said.

"Deadly force, with any of the lions and tigers," he said. "If you don't kill them right off, you're going to piss them off." The tough mane of a lion will probably deflect major damage, he said.

A bit of advice he imparted: If there is a chain and padlock on a gate, there's an animal inside. Besides the perimeter fence around the property, there is a double fence around the animals.



HORACE LANGFORD JR. / PVT
Zuzana Kukol bottle-feeds
Pebbles, one of her tigers.



HORACE LANGFORD JR. / PVT
Scott Shoemaker, at right,
explains security details to Chief
Scott Lewis and his firefighters.

Firefighters enjoyed taking photos of the animals with their cellular phones. Firefighter Alan Bigelow recalled having his picture taken with a tiger with Karl Mitchell some years ago. Lt. Tim Murray recalled spotting a cougar once on a roof in eastern San Diego County. Another firefighter was sprayed by a growling ocelot who was in heat.

Covered cages allow the smaller cats, the bobcat, ocelot and cougar, to avoid direct sunlight.

"All of them were born and raised in captivity and they've all been around humans. Like Bam Bam, he was a photo cub. The thing is, we prefer those animals. They get very well socialized to being around humans. They don't see humans as a threat. They see us as providers. We feed them," Shoemaker said.

Pepper, a 12-year-old white Siberian tiger, was a little shy of the crowd at first, but came out to the pool for the tour.

In case of a fire, Shoemaker suggested one firefighter be assigned to work with him and Kukol, the others can fight the fire. Shoemaker and Kukol will handle any safety events that happen in the cages, like a fall.

"The lion -- never turn your back, and if you encounter them, don't turn your back and walk away from them or don't try and run. They'll catch you. That's the way they play and that's the way they hunt. They may just jump and pin you to the ground. The best thing to do is keep facing them and just back up or get a barrier in between you and them. You can just grab a fence door or anything," Shoemaker said.

Shoemaker and Kukol take the lions and tigers out for occasional walks, still inside the compound. They have big chains anchored by tie-downs two and a half feet into the ground in case the animals get spooked about something.

Animals are rotated between the various cages so they don't become too territorial, he said.

"One thing about these animals, if they get out, they're outside their territory so they're not as confident. They're probably more scared of you than anything," Shoemaker said.

The pair also have equipment like an air rifle with a tranquilizer dart, a catch pole, netting and transport cages, he said.

The Nye County Animal Control Officer has visited their compound, Shoemaker said.

Fire Chief Scott Lewis said the visit was a good opportunity to get to know the occupants.

"We have a layout of the property and a plan established if there is a fire or safety event," Lewis said. "They seem to be very well organized. The animals seem to be very well taken care of."