



Saving 'Big Cats'

One man's life's work rescuing and making a home for abused lions, tigers, and other fearsome felines.

By **Adam Kent-Isaac** • Photography by **Steve Raymer**

A fierce roar pierces the silence with frightening volume and intensity.

Then, another roar echoes out from a different place. And another. Suddenly, the whole forest is reverberating with a cacophony of deep, throaty growls and shrieks as lions and tigers and unidentifiable beasts call out to each other in a language all their own.

Over here, a massive lion sporting a majestic mane strips the meat from a bone with nothing but its tongue; over there, a pensive cougar stares off into the distance. A pair of sleek leopards pace back and forth. Bobcats jump and play among the trees.

A simple sign reads "Exotic Feline Rescue Center."

Nose to nose: Exotic Feline Rescue Center owner and founder Taft greets a tiger with a nose-bump, a gesture of affection for cats big and small. Taft and his cats have enough mutual trust for such physical contact; anyone else might be attacked.

A world unto itself

With over 200 feline residents at any given time, the Exotic Feline Rescue Center (EFRC) is the second-largest institution of its kind in the United States, says owner Joe Taft, who founded the center in 1991.

It's located on 108 acres of forested land near Center Point, about an hour's drive from comfortable and cosmopolitan Bloomington. With 15 paid employees and around 20 volunteers, a veterinary clinic, and butchering barn, the center is a world unto itself.

By Taft's own admission, his life is entirely dedicated to the EFRC. He lives there, he takes no vacations, and the only time he does travel is when he's on rescue missions to pick up cats in need. Gentle and soft-spoken, Taft nonetheless is the man at the EFRC, the man who, by far, is the most experienced with big cats, and the only one who is comfortable inside their cages.

"I'm not afraid to go in with them," says Taft. "I've kept big cats for forty-eight years. I don't do things that make me nervous." His career as cat-keeper began, he recalls, when he "bought an ocelot, for no good reason, when I was a student at Indiana State University in 1965. After the ocelot, I lived with a leopard for nineteen years."

Taft made it his mission to learn how to properly care for the animals. With a few decades of experience under his belt, and his knowledge that so many cats were being abandoned or mistreated, he felt ready to establish a shelter for these magnificent and often abused animals. "I bought the original piece of property here for the rescue center, and then once it was incorporated as a nonprofit, we acquired two adjoining pieces of land," he says. "I did it pretty much alone up until we had thirty or so cats."

"Big cats" and "small cats"

Tigers are the most numerous residents of the center. But there also are lions and leopards, which, along with the tigers, are known as the "big cats." The smaller animals include bobcats, cougars (also known as mountain lions, panthers, or pumas), lynxes, and servals (a wiry, spotted cat with large pointy ears).

Even among the tigers, there are different varieties. Along with the more common orange-and-black striped tigers, there are several white tigers. Their predominantly white coat is caused by a genetic mutation that inhibits the production of the typical orange pigment; such

cats are not true albinos, as their coats still feature black stripes. There's also a golden tabby tiger, of which there are fewer than 40 in the world, according to Taft. Cream-colored with orange stripes, it is not unlike a common tabby housecat. This variety of tiger never existed in the wild; it was created by breeders.

Roaming the grounds of the center, mingling with visitors, are several domestic cats—stray and feral cats, unofficially adopted by the employees, and seemingly comfortable in the presence of their much larger cousins. They enjoy watching the big guys, but, Taft says, they also know to keep their distance.

Where do the big cats come from?

"That's one of the meth lab cats," says Taft, gesturing toward a tiger. The animal "came from a place between Columbus [Indiana] and Indianapolis, where a guy had twenty-one tigers, seven leopards, three bears, and a meth lab." He points at another one. "This tiger was born at the meth lab, and the meth lab guy sold him to a fellow in Chicago who was arrested for two hundred and forty-odd counts of child molesting."

This story is not at all atypical of the origins of many of these big cats, who are frequently purchased by individuals on the margins of society possessing little or no qualification to properly care for them. Some acquire the cats intending to exhibit them for profit or to breed them and sell them to circuses. For others, they're a status symbol, a fashion accessory to broadcast the owner's manliness or eccentricity.

Laws concerning the private possession of big cats vary from state to state, with many banning private ownership outright. It is legal in other states, including Indiana, so long as the owner acquires the proper permits. Taft believes that in many cases, permits are handed out too freely, and the minimum standards, such as cage size, are far too lenient. And, then, of course, there's the black market, which spans the country and follows no law but the dollar.

A pair of leopards at the center, named George and Rodney, originally came from Long Island, New York. "This guy had chained his wife to the basement stairs and beat her. When she escaped she went to the police, who found four kids and two leopards." Taft had been there four months earlier to remove a different animal from the premises. "It was not the kind of place we usually go—it was a multi-acre hilltop estate with a new Corvette in the driveway," Taft says. "Big, fancy, expensive house."

A tiger, perched with a friend in an off-limits section of the center, rises from its slumber at the sound of a familiar staff member approaching. Tigers comprise the majority of residents at the EFRC.



'After federal agents had blown the place apart with assault rifles, we had to shoot darts at the panicked tigers.'



(above) The coloring of a white tiger's coat is caused by a genetic mutation that inhibits the production of orange pigment. However, this does not mean white tigers are albino, as their coats still feature black stripes.

(right) Being comfortable with blood and guts is a necessity for the staff, whose tasks include butchering whole livestock donated by farms around the state.

The cat rescuer points to another enclosure where the cats came from a more typical scenario. "These four tigers all lived the first few years of their lives two to a cage, in tiny cages," he explains. "One was in a barn outside of Peru, Indiana, living her whole life in a cage five by seven feet and so dirty you couldn't see through it."

The owner, despite having a circus training background, "just didn't give a damn," and "thought it was fine to keep them that way." According to Taft, federal authorities agreed. "The USDA [U.S. Department of Agriculture] renewed his permits year after year after year, until they finally confiscated them all, called me one morning and told me to take them away. We did it the next day, in a blizzard."

The most harrowing rescue to date? "There was a group of people who were picking up big cats, mostly from around the Midwest, and taking them to Chicago in a horse trailer, shooting them, skinning them, and selling the hides and the meat," Taft recounts. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service infiltrated the smugglers, documenting the killing of a number of tigers, and was finally able to shut down the operation. Taft was called to pick up the survivors.

"We had to take a group of tigers that had been born there and were seven years old and had had no human contact. After federal agents had blown the place apart with assault rifles, we had to shoot darts at these panicked tigers. We got them all out safely, but it took four hours and almost two thousand dollars worth of drugs."

Taft typically participates in such rescues personally, in cooperation with state and federal agencies, for which he has become a go-to guy when exotic felines are discovered in sordid surroundings.

"Room Service"

Meat is what these cats crave, and they collectively consume three or four thousand pounds of it every day. In its natural habitat, a cat must stalk, chase, and kill a meal, whether it's a 500-pound wildebeest or a scrawny rabbit. The residents of the EFRC, though, get room service: huge slabs of raw meat, still on the bone, cut from freshly butchered livestock.

The meat typically comes from sick, injured, or recently deceased animals no longer valuable to farmers. At little or no charge, says Taft, the center will pick up horses, cows, buffalo, and even the occasional llama. It's not uncommon for employees to travel 250 miles or more



during the course of a typical day to pick up livestock. It's all butchered on-site, with any waste recycled into a compost pile.

Rebecca Rizzo has been the head keeper for the past nine years. In addition to feeding, she says, "we clean the cages, pull out the bone, give them new straw; we make sure everything's tidy and looks good." The keepers do not go inside the cats' cages per se; they work from inside an enclosed "shift area," essentially a cage within a cage, separated by a sliding gate from the space occupied by the feline. "That way we can do it safely," says Rizzo.

"They trust us to an extent," she adds. "They know the routines around here and that we're not going to come up to them and start poking them or beating them. But they are wild animals. Because of that, their instinct is to only trust us so much...and our instinct is to only trust them so much. The second you let your guard down is when something happens...and when something happens, it's done."

The Accident

The latter point is highlighted by an incident that occurred on June 21, when keeper Marissa Dub was mauled by a tiger. The inner sliding door was inadvertently left open, and the animal, a full-grown male named Raja, attacked her. Taft intervened quickly and sprayed the tiger with water, which caused it to loosen its grip. He then lured it away with an offering of meat. Dub was rushed to the hospital with severe head, neck, and vocal cord injuries. "When they all came, the cat was on me and my head was basically in his mouth," she told *The Associated Press*.

The 23-year-old keeper, anxious to get back to the cats she loves, returned to work part time on August 5 and is expected to make a full recovery. A Marissa Dub Benefit Fund has been set up by her family at BMO Harris Bank to help pay her medical bills.

The attack served as a reminder to the center's employees and volunteers that safety is always of the utmost importance, both for the

benefit of everyone involved and the reputation of the center and the valuable work it does.

When a big cat gets sick

The center has a veterinary clinic on-site, equipped with anesthesia machines specially designed for large animals, surgical lighting, an X-ray machine, and all the supplies necessary for treating the cats. When it is necessary to sedate a cat, Taft says they prefer to make use of a "pole syringe," basically a spear tipped with a syringe, which is "less traumatic than shooting them with a dart. We don't want to dart these guys unless we really have to."

The cats are cared for by Dr. Fred Froderman, DVM, of the Clear Lake Veterinary Hospital in nearby Brazil, Indiana. Froderman lives just a few miles away, and has been on call to the center for the past ten years. "He's wonderful," says Rizzo. "He's really good about being here as soon as we need him. We've never run into a problem where we couldn't get him out here for us."

The cats can require attention for a variety of medical conditions, which can include everything from thyroid problems to allergies to pain management. The latter is particularly important for the cats who have been declawed by their previous owners, which can result in permanent mobility problems.

“We also do a lot of dental work and blood work,” says Froderman, “and cancer shows up when the cats get old.” He took special training in sedating the large cats, but other than that, he says it’s not tremendously different from working on smaller animals, as “the disease processes are very similar.”

For Froderman, “the excitement and the oohs and aahs of working on big cats” is not that big a deal after a decade of attending to them. “I will say that the Exotic Feline Rescue Center cuts no corners when it comes to taking care of these cats,” he notes. “And as a result, many of them are living to be twenty years or older.”

Tiffs and amorous acts

The cats do occasionally attack each other, Rizzo points out. “They’ll have tiffs. You’ll see marks here and there. But nobody lives with anybody who’s going to cause a problem, and if we do see that, we separate them. Scratches on these guys might look disgusting, but it’s not more than a paper cut to us, because they have such thick hide.”

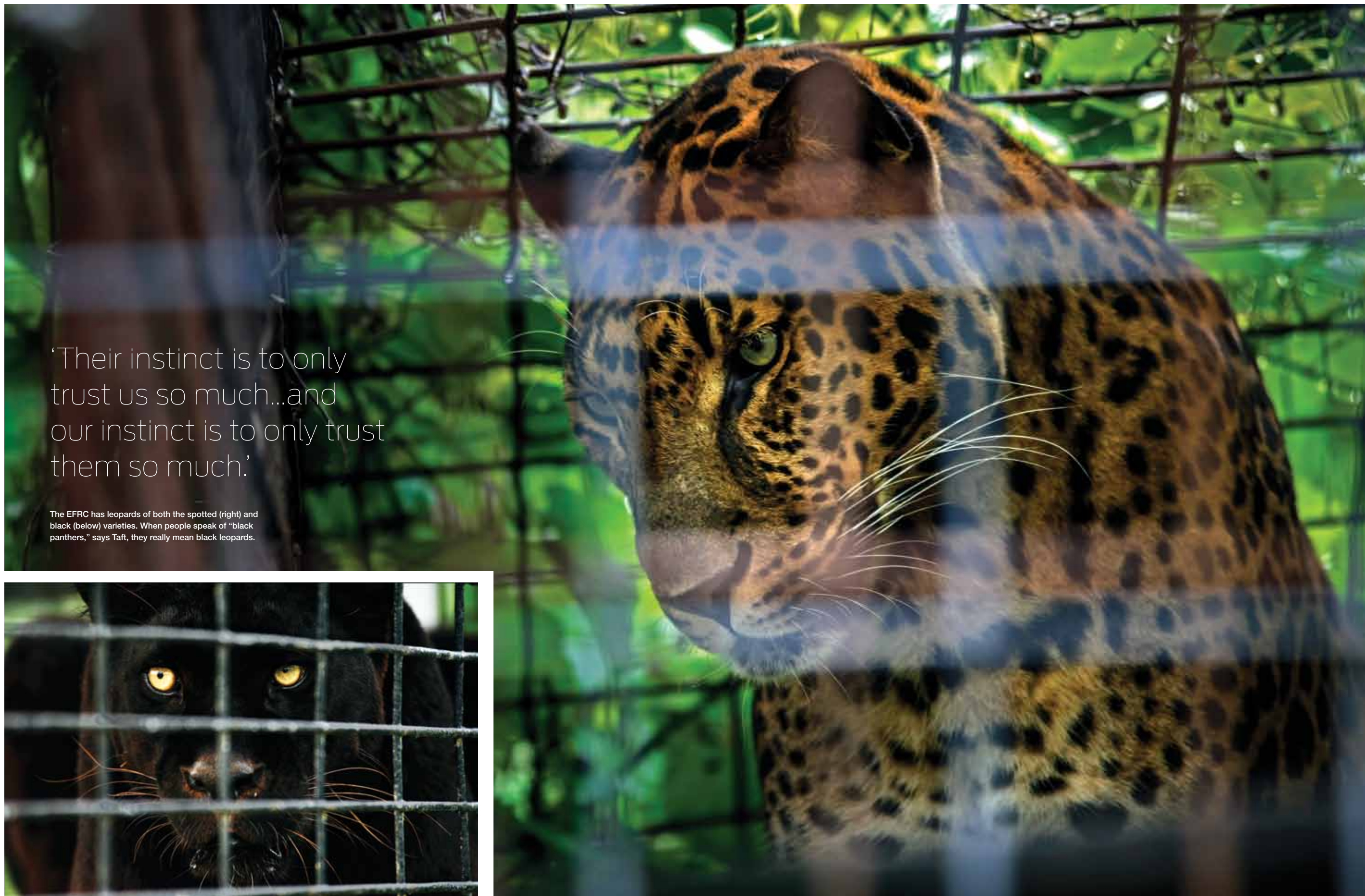
Some of the enclosures contain both male and female cats. Breeding males who come to the center are typically neutered, as the center is in the business of housing cats, not making more of them. While this eliminates the reproductive ability, it does not affect sexual behavior. Amorous acts between cats still occur, says Taft, but it’s “for recreation, not procreation!”

Spend the night

Tours, led by the keepers, are available daily. Appointments aren’t necessary; visitors need only to pay the \$10 admission fee (\$5 for children 12 and under).

“We enjoy leading the tours,” says Rizzo. “It’s important to educate the public on where these animals are coming from, and the problems with them being out there. Most people have no idea about the problems with these cats in captivity.”

Visitors wishing to take the experience to another level can stay overnight at the EFRC. A comfortable guest room is available for one or two people at a time (though no children),



‘Their instinct is to only trust us so much...and our instinct is to only trust them so much.’

The EFRC has leopards of both the spotted (right) and black (below) varieties. When people speak of “black panthers,” says Taft, they really mean black leopards.



located amidst the cat habitats. “It’s a neat thing to do,” says Taft. “You’ve got tigers right outside your window. You get to spend as much time on tours as you like, and you get a behind-the-scenes tour of the rest of the facility.”

Where the money comes from

“It’s amazing how few grants we get,” says Taft, “considering that we are the second largest collection of big cats in the country. But when you’re talking about big cats and you don’t have AZA [Association of Zoos & Aquariums] after your name, that money is hard to come by.”

Jean Herrberg is the assistant director of the EFRC and handles the financial side of the operation. “We get no state money, no federal money, no government money of any kind,” she says. “The largest percentage of our income comes from people walking through the front gate.”

The center had an estimated 40,000 visitors last year. The sale of merchandise and individu-

al donations make up a smaller portion of the income.

For tax-deductible monetary gifts, the center has a multi-level donation system. Donors can “sponsor a cat” for \$50, or purchase a membership ranging from \$150 to \$10,000, each coming with a certain number of complimentary guest passes—unlimited in the case of the highest level, “Pride Membership.”

Some of the institutions that have contributed to the center include Clark Charitable Trust of Boston, Walmart, Duke Energy Foundation, and the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium in Ohio. Herrberg says NASCAR driver and native Hoosier, Tony Stewart, also donates.

To augment the finances, numerous fundraisers are held throughout the year. The Boomer Ball Bash is a fall banquet with food, wine, and music. For the Rescue Ride, motorcyclists travel from Indianapolis to the EFRC, then participate in an auction and raffle. Run Through the Jungle, a 5K run, makes use

(above) Lion in repose: one of the male lions at the center displays his mane.

(above right) Head keeper Rebecca Rizzo’s commanding presence is the result of nine years’ experience with her ferocious charges.

(below right) Designer breed: a golden tabby tiger lounges in the shade, sporting a combination of colors not seen in the wild.

of the winding forest trails surrounding the cat habitats.

Donations of useful items also are appreciated and can include everything from construction materials to horsefly traps to medical supplies. One of the clinic’s anesthesia machines was a gift from a hospital. A list of needed items can be found at the website, exoticfeline rescuecenter.org.



Getting Involved

People looking to assist the EFRC in its mission have a number of options. College students can apply for an internship. Indiana University’s Center for the Integrative Study of Animal Behavior has a for-credit internship with the EFRC, but students with any educational background can pursue a non-credit internship.

College students who aspire to writing careers find the center to be an intriguing story. “We’re inundated with kids from the journalism school,” notes Taft.

The EFRC is always seeking volunteers. But work at the center is not for the faint-hearted, as even a brief glimpse of the blood and guts would indicate, as well as the sheer size of the operation, and the prodigious labor required to keep it running. Rizzo says many would-be volunteers “don’t realize the amount of work involved, and think that they’ll be able to get more interaction with the animals—that it will just be petting cats.”

The EFRC is no petting zoo. A sign at the entrance makes it clear, in no uncertain terms: “Touch a cat and you will be asked to leave.” And that’s just the least undesirable outcome. Taft is fond of telling people, with a nonchalance that belies his seriousness, “If your arm goes through the cage, it’s not coming out.” ✨

