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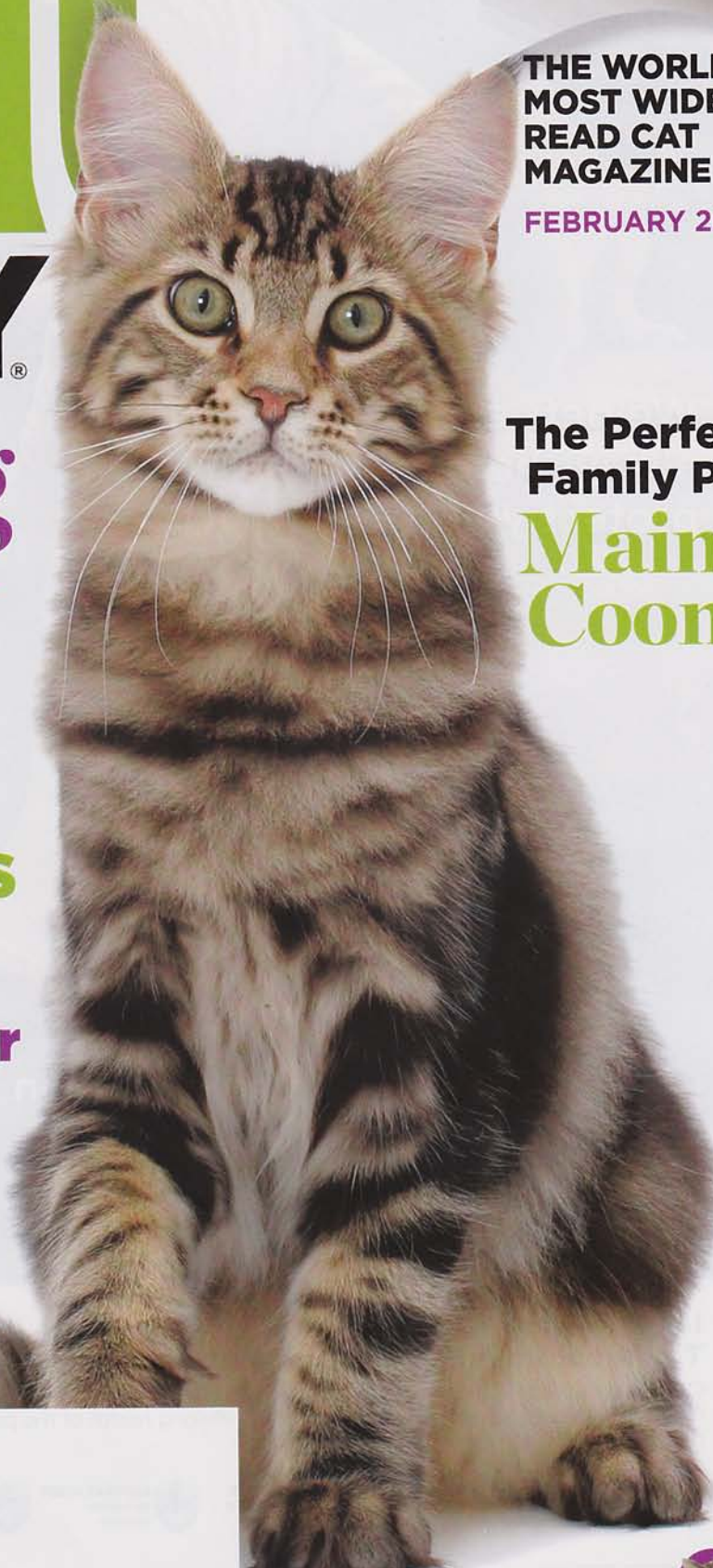
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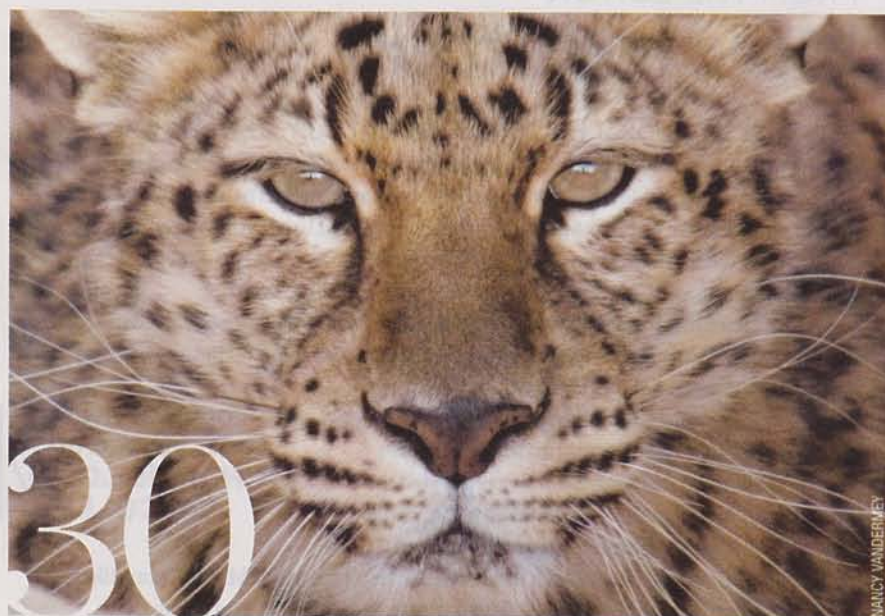
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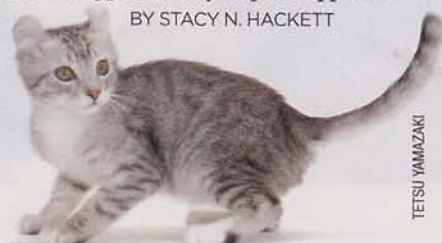
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**THE FELINE  
CONSERVATION  
CENTER  
HELPS  
BIG CATS  
SURVIVE  
AND  
THRIVE.**

# Wild

Since life began, countless species have come and gone due to changing physical and biological conditions. Although extinction occurs naturally, the decline of many animals has accelerated due to loss of habitat, environmental pollution and human intervention. In the early 1970s, before Congress passed the Endangered Species Act and when selling exotic animals was still legal, Joe Maynard spied an advertisement

Amur leopard Masha,  
born at the EFBC in 1997



BY DENISE FLECK  
PHOTO BY NANCY VANDERMEY

# World

touting a leopard cub for sale. He purchased the cub and began researching proper care for the animal. Learning that many zoos were importing wild-born cats that were not adjusting well to life in captivity, Maynard was compelled to make a difference. His goal: to breed and raise captive-born animals in a stress-free environment. Thus, the Exotic Feline Breeding Compound's Feline Conservation Center (EFBC/FCC) was born.



Affectionately known as The Cat House, the Center was not originally open to the public. Word of mouth, however, created a demand, so regular operating hours were established to accommodate visitors, and the Center incorporated as a nonprofit organization to accept donations for funding. Located in the high desert 80 miles north of Los Angeles in Rosamond, Calif., the Center is a home away from the wild for more than 70 wild cats.

### Perpetuating the Species

Although stopping the removal of animals from the wild into zoos was once its agenda, the Center's focus has shifted to genetic preservation through captive means.

"It's still a trial-and-error effort," says volunteer Eric Barkalow. "Many felids will kill a mate, so introductions work best if done at a young age. We have worked with artificial efforts, but no embryos have taken. A jaguar can mate 100 times in a

single day. It is impossible to reproduce that artificially, so letting nature take its course is the only method available."

**The EFBC's street sign**

Worldwide cooperation is imperative in preventing genetic bottlenecks, so new bloodlines are regularly imported. Felids brought in include fishing cats, Amur leopards and Pallas cats. Currently, the quest is for a North Chinese leopard, as no other U.S. facility has viable breeding stock.

"Success breeds success and confidence with other facilities, which allows [the Center] to try breeding species other facilities had poor success in doing," affirms Jim Sanderson, PhD, of the Small Wild Cat Conservation Foundation. "Many volunteers have been on board for many years and have a wealth of experience. This is extremely important because cats are sensitive to their environment and the people around them."

### Thriving in Captivity

More than 17 wild cat species call The Cat House home.

"Pallas cats number about 50 in North



Though not a rescue facility, the Center does work with local fish and game departments to assist in placements from private homes and abusive situations. Some of the non-breeding animals come from these avenues.

"Cats tend to be pretty lazy, so most of them do well in a captive environment," Barkalow says. They are kept active, however, with anything from a phone book to a bowling ball to a cardboard box. Fresh sprigs of rosemary or drops of peppermint oil supply a natural "high" when the cats rub their heads and roll in the scents, while ice treats or a nice tub of water are prized possessions on hot days.

"Wild cats are true carnivores and generally eat anything they can catch," explains head keeper Melany Marotta. "We feed a diet of all natural chicken and horse meat plus twice weekly vitamin

supplements." The fishing cats (as their name suggests) are more specialized hunters, so they receive fresh water smelt. It's all about helping the cats thrive and tailoring life to their specific needs. Smaller felids (such as the margay, ocelot, Pallas cat and jungle cat) that prey on rodents receive mice with their meal. The big cats

(leopards, jaguars and cougars) get an occasional beef bone to gnaw on. "Some cats have preferences such as all legs, no thigh meat," Barkalow quips,

"while those that exhibit extraneous girth have the fat and skin removed."

Just like their smaller domestic cousins, each of the Center's cats has its own personality. Some take to the cared-for life better than others. Some are kept away from the public to keep them stress-free because, after all, their purpose is to breed. The fishing cats and Pallas cats are primarily the

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Melany Marotta, head keeper, walking leopard cub Yanna



## A female Pallas cat

America, with 11 residing at the EFBC/FCC," Barkalow says. "Persian leopards number six in North America and close to 50 in European zoos, while the only female in North America is housed here and was brought in from France. Amur leopards number less than 50 in the wild, and we have experienced 12 successful births at the Compound. The North Chinese leopard is well-represented at the EFBC/FCC but is hard to find anywhere else. Its fate in the wild is likely to follow the Amur leopard's decline, and as the founder species to the Amur line, it is an important subspecies to conserve."

**MORE THAN**  
**17**  
**WILD CAT SPECIES CALL THE CAT HOUSE HOME.**



ones not on display, although word has it that Boris, a Pallas cat, doesn't mind the occasional human.

### Return to the Wild?

Saving a species doesn't guarantee that they will be successfully reintroduced to the wild.

"There are several components to any successful reintroduction program," says board member Nancy Vandermey. "One, you need enough captive breeding stock to provide a surplus while maintaining genetic diversity. Two, you require a reintroduction area that is protected and has a large prey base. Three, you need to train animals prior to reintroduction. Four, you have to monitor the animals post-release. And, five, you have to educate the public to the benefits of reintroduction and ensure long-term commitments from the public, governments and funding sources."

The two largest barriers are finding

large, protected areas without existing populations, and ... how *does* a person "teach" a leopard to sneak up on prey, pounce quickly and deliver the kill? These skills aren't in the average human's playbook, but in the wild, mother cats spend 18 to 24 months teaching these techniques to their young.

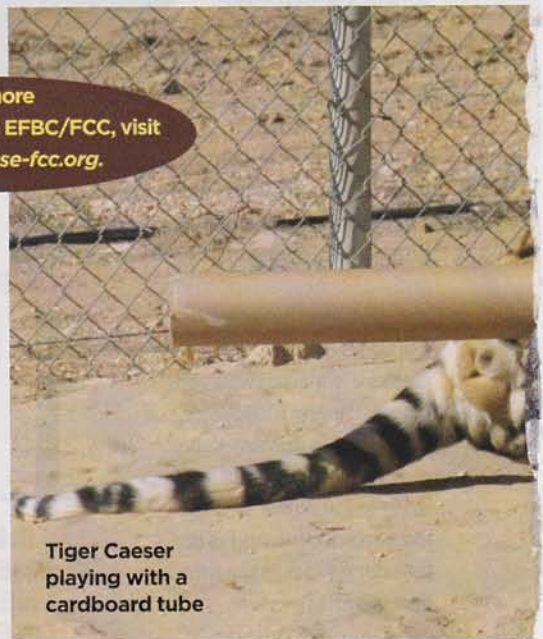
One possible way to reintroduce a captive-born species into the wild is through cross-fostering — where captive-born young are raised in the wild by another member of their species or even by a closely related species. A wild female's den must be located shortly after giving birth, and captive-born cubs of the same age need to be available. Then a swap is done of a wild cub for a captive-born one. While overall numbers stay the same, this could help prevent inbreeding and perpetuate the species.

Captive breeding programs are some species' last hope for survival. Sarah Christie, conservation programme manager of the Zoological Society of London, explains: "Populations of endangered species in zoos

indirectly provide conservation support for their wild relations ... through public awareness, inspiration and education. [They also fill] the potential role as stock for

**Volunteer Nancy Vandermey with leopard cubs Yanna and LiMing**

For more information on the EFBC/FCC, visit [www.cathouse-fcc.org](http://www.cathouse-fcc.org).



**Tiger Caesar playing with a cardboard tube**

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reintroduction if their wild brethren were to become extinct," she says. The Amur leopard is an excellent candidate in that only 30 to 40 exist in the wild.

**It's About the Cats**

"We have an Amur leopard going through chemotherapy treatments, and he is responding very well," Marotta says. "The cats at EFBC/FCC receive the best medical care possible. A 16-year-old leopard broke her ankle last year and, while she might have been euthanized at another facility, we had her ankle surgically repaired. When a cat needs the smallest attention, they get it... antibiotic ointment on a minor cut or a few drops in an eye. I rub fly repellent on the tips of a leopard's ears. Anything that can be done will be done to ensure the best, healthiest, fulfilling life we can provide."

According to Jim Fouts, chairman of the Zoological Association of America, "The EFBC ranks as one of the very best in the world in captive feline propagation due to their singular dedication. [Their] success can be directly attributed to Joe



**Melany Marotta, head keeper, getting ready to feed an infant fishing cat**

Maynard and his staff's commitment. I don't know of any other facility with their track record." Camille Gadwood, the Center's public relations director, sums it up: "As the human species has the greatest impact on this planet, both good and bad, it is the human species that has the capability to save wild cats and restore balance. My hope is in

knowing I do all I can to see the work and mission of the Exotic Feline Breeding Compound continue." 🐾

*Denise Fleck is an author and animal care instructor specializing in pet first aid & CPR. She appears regularly on KTLA in Los Angeles and has shared animal life-saving skills on numerous television shows. Once ruled by a Siamese calico, she lives near Los Angeles with her husband and rescued dogs Haiku and Bonsai. She gets her feline fix volunteering at her local shelter. She has recently published an animal care series of Pocket Guides by Quickfind Books. To learn more about Denise, visit [www.sunnydogink.com](http://www.sunnydogink.com).*



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