Big Cat Rescue Celebrating 20 Years Helping Exotic Cats

By Alicia Squillante

Located just east of the Veteran’s Expressway and alongside the Citrus Park Mall resides Big Cat Rescue, a well-known sanctuary for exotic cats of all shapes and sizes. The sanctuary, which began in 1992 by founder Carole Baskin, is celebrating its 20th anniversary this November. While no celebrations are currently lined up for the momentous occasion, the volunteers and staff of Big Cat Rescue want to continue to impress the importance of the sanctuary to captive exotic cats, the ones that currently call the sanctuary home, and the ones that someday might.

The beginnings for Big Cat Rescue were humble, as many beginnings are. Baskin and her late husband, Don, came upon Windsong the bobcat kitten. Windsong had been a pet, and when the owner’s wife could no longer handle the bobcat, Baskin’s agreed to take the kitten. Windsong would be the first in a long line of exotic cats helped by the sanctuary. A year later the couple discovered a breeding facility in Minnesota that raised lynxes to eventually become pets for people. Those that weren’t sold were killed for their fur. Horrified at the terrible conditions the cats were forced to endure, the couple bought all 56 kittens and transported them back to Florida. For a while the Baskins cared for and sold the kittens, thinking that they were helping the cats find good permanent homes. Time passed, however, and Carole Baskin realized that the kittens she gave away were being brought back because they were becoming too much to handle. That, coupled with wisdom only time can bring, Baskin decided in 1997 to disallow breeding and to spay and neuter all the animals currently in the sanctuary. Still guilty over her early ignorance, Baskin admitted that her mindset regarding the sanctuary had changed drastically over the years and that she feels that the focus of Big Cat Rescue is much more work to be done. Big Cat Rescue will continue to fight for the welfare of cats everywhere, both large and small. To learn more about the cats of Big Cat Rescue, to check tour schedules, or to donate please visit bigcatrescue.org.

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