

Latest step in lion search: live traps with 'people food'



Mike De Sisti

After getting a call, Milwaukee police look for the lion-like animal near a drainage ditch under a bridge crossing at N. Cameron Ave. near 31st. in Milwaukee on Tuesday.

By Marion Renault

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Search continues for "lion-like animal"



The Milwaukee lion saga continues

And so it has come to this: a mix of turkey, chicken, summer sausage and McNuggets — bait for the first live traps put out Tuesday evening for the lion-like animal that has evaded capture for more than a week.

While the possibility of a roving wild mountain lion hasn't been ruled out, it's more likely that the creature — the subject of 14 claimed sightings by the public over the weekend alone — is an escaped or released exotic urban pet, said Karen Sparapani, executive director of the Milwaukee Area Domestic Animal Control Commission.

"A wild animal would've left Dodge a long time ago," she said. "There's really nothing here: no quiet, there's no mates, and there's not really the free range and the privacy they like. If it

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was a wild animal, the thinking is it would not have enjoyed its stay and moved on. This one doesn't know where to go."

Hence the mysterious "lion-like" cat is being lured with unusually human-like bait that an owner might feed them.

"We just assume that like everybody else who gives their animal 'people food,' they would have given the lion table scraps," she said.

Valley of the Kings Sanctuary and Retreat in Sharon — home to 39 animals, among them lions, tigers, cougars, bears, bobcats and wolf hybrids — is on 24-hour standby to pick up the animal once it has been safely trapped, said Sparapani.

"No one wants the Milwaukee lion to leave Wisconsin," she said.

Officials from the Animal Control Commission, Milwaukee police and state Department of Natural Resources set up multiple non-lethal traps — Sparapani would not say how many —

near the last confirmed sighting of the creature in a ravine near N. 31st St. and W. Cameron Ave.

For an initial three days, the traps will be monitored so that any pets or other animals that might stumble in can be freed, she said. Then authorities will reconsider next steps.

"This has been dragging on so long," Sparapani said. "We think this is a better solution ... rather than running around every time there's a sighting."

Sparapani was with police and five state wardens who swept the culvert Sunday morning only to find a set of tracks — one of two sets spotted by police since they began their weeklong search.

"It was an enormous use of manpower," she said.

Milwaukee police said in a news release Tuesday that it has continued to receive calls in the past two days from citizens reporting sightings of a large, wild cat. The police urged citizens to remain careful despite any curiosity.

Police also took note of the number of people drawn to the area, presumably because they want to find the animal on their own. "The public is asked not to endanger themselves and to leave it to wildlife experts to photograph or capture the cat," Lt. Mark Stanmeyer said in the release.

Mayor Tom Barrett said at a press conference Tuesday that he now believes there is a "lion-type animal" prowling part the city.

"I don't know that this lion, if it is going to be apprehended, is going to live. I don't know that you allow a lion to live that's in an urban area," he said. "My major concern is that no one gets hurt."

He did, though, joke that the city plans on bringing in a kangaroo to feed the national media frenzy over the urban lion — "just to give a different flavor to this."

Exotic urban pet, or wandering wild animal?

Though most have stopped denying the existence of a large, vagabond carnivore in Milwaukee, there is still disagreement on its origin.

In other parts of the country, including California and Colorado, wild mountain lions and coyotes have moved undetected through urban areas without causing problems, said Adrian Treves, professor of environmental studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies.

"I'm perfectly willing to believe that a wild mountain lion made its way into Milwaukee using those vegetated waterways and ravines to penetrate quite far into the city," he said. "It's unusual behavior, but it happens. I'm not surprised."

According to Treves, large carnivores are "re-wilding," or repopulating their native habitats across the U.S. — a sign of successful conservation efforts and ecosystem recovery.

But Sparapani and her team is operating under the impression that an animal either escaped or was set free by owners unable to care for a large cat within the bounds of their yards or basements.

[Wisconsin is among six states that have no restrictions on owning exotic pets](#), which makes pet reptiles, crocodiles — and yes, big cats — more common than most would think.

"It's a very common thing," she said. "It's intoxicating to have this majestic animal that you're bottle feeding as a baby. It's this life-changing experience, but it's never in the best interest of the animal."

If it is indeed a former pet, the owner could be invaluable to the capture by calling the animal's name or providing enticing familiar-smelling objects. There is no interest in prosecuting an owner, she said.

"This is not about getting someone in trouble or having someone take responsibility," Sparapani said. "It's about doing the best thing for the animal."

For now, Sparapani believes the animal has found fresh water, abundant wildlife and a secure hiding spot in or near that ravine. Like any house cat, it's capable of snatching itself a duck or rabbit if it gets hungry, she said.

"If I was an escaped pet lion, that's the place I'd want to be," she said. "We just want a safe ending to this story."

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