

Walnut Prairie Wildside

204 Mulberry St., West Union, IL 62477

Walnut Prairie Wildside, operated by Thomas Edmonds, has failed to meet minimum standards for the care of animals used in exhibitions as established by the federal Animal Welfare Act (AWA). The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has repeatedly cited it for numerous infractions, including failing to handle animals, including a tiger cub, in a manner that minimized the risk of harm to them and the public during exhibition; failing to have sufficient barriers and distance between animals and the viewing public; failing to have an adequate perimeter fence around the facility; failing to maintain enclosures in good repair; and failing to clean and sanitize enclosures properly. According to inspectors, Edmonds has demonstrated a lack of training in, knowledge of, and experience with raising and handling large, dangerous animals like tigers. Because of the lack of barriers and adequate supervision, guests were able to approach primary enclosures, and a lynx scratched a 2-year-old child and a prairie dog bit another guest's finger as a result.

August 20, 2020: Edmonds was issued a written warning by the Illinois Conservation Police for the unlawful possession and sale of a striped skunk.

January 16, 2020: The USDA issued Walnut Prairie Wildside a critical, repeat citation for failing to handle animals in a manner that minimized the risk of harm to them and the public during exhibition. Between November 2019 and January

2020, the facility was using a juvenile tiger named Tony who was well over 20 weeks old in full-contact exhibitions with members of the public, including children. During these encounters, members of the public were allowed into an enclosure with the loose tiger, with no trainer close enough to be able to stop an incident if the animal became too playful or aggressive and no barriers or areas to prevent contact between the tiger and the public. Because of the lack of barriers, the safety of the public depended solely on the supervision of the keeper, who did not use a lead or harness or have any direct control over the animal. The inspection report noted that the tiger was at an age at which he was biting, scratching, pawing, and play-wrestling and was too big (over 55 pounds) and too strong to be loose in a cage with members of the public, especially young children. The licensee did not receive any acceptable specialized training in handling or training adult tigers, and the handling procedures used in interactions between the public and the tiger underscored the lack of knowledge, experience, and good judgement of the licensee.

The USDA also issued Walnut Prairie Wildside a repeat citation for failing to have an adequate perimeter fence around the facility. The fence covered only half of the property, with three entry gates missing and the entire back fence line of the property incomplete. Since the last inspection, seven new enclosures had been added to the outdoor area, with no surrounding perimeter fence. Enclosures for tigers, porcupines, and bobcats used one side of the perimeter fence as a primary enclosure fence. The lack of a perimeter fence around these enclosures could allow easier contact between unwanted people or other animals and the animals in the facility and could allow animals who escaped their primary enclosures to escape the entire facility. One side of the tiger enclosure was next to an

ungated entryway to the property, which could easily be accessed from an adjacent public road. This could allow members of the public to access the facility, including the tiger enclosure, and have contact with the tigers through the primary enclosure fence.

July 18, 2019: The USDA issued Walnut Prairie Wildside a critical, repeat citation for failing to handle animals in a manner that minimized the risk of harm to them and the public during exhibition, with sufficient distance and/or barriers between the animals and the viewing public. On July 8, 2019, during an unsupervised tour of the facility, a group of four adults and six children approached the lynx enclosure's primary fence, which did not have an adequate barrier fence, and a lynx reached through and grabbed the shirt of a 2-year-old boy, pulling the child toward the fence and scratching his head, forehead, and forearm. During a tour on July 13, 2019, two unsupervised guests approached the open-top prairie dog enclosure, and because of a lack of adequate distance and barriers, one guest was able to stick their hand into the enclosure and a prairie dog bit them on the finger.

The USDA issued Walnut Prairie Wildside a repeat citation for failing to ensure that surfaces and furniture for the primates were constructed of materials that could readily be cleaned and sanitized. The wooden shelves and platforms for the white-headed lemurs and vervet monkeys were soiled and had gummy, brown grime stuck to the surfaces. The USDA also issued Walnut Prairie Wildside a repeat citation for failing to have an adequate perimeter fence around the facility. The perimeter fence covered half of the property, with three entry gates missing. The tiger enclosure was using two sides of the perimeter fence as a primary enclosure fence, so it did not have the required 3-foot distance between the

enclosure and a secondary perimeter fence. The lack of a perimeter fence could allow easier contact between unwanted people or other animals and the animals in the facility and could allow animals who escaped their primary enclosures to escape the entire facility.

July 17, 2019: The USDA cited Walnut Prairie Wildside for failing to handle animals in a manner that minimized the risk of harm to them and the public during exhibition, with sufficient distance and/or barriers between the animals and the viewing public. A group of visitors consisting of four adults and two children was left unattended in enclosures housing white-headed lemurs, coatimundis, and a raccoon and was allowed to interact freely with and feed the animals while the tour guide was outside the enclosures. The public was also allowed to feed the two green vervet monkeys without direct supervision, and a young child was seen placing his hands on the wire enclosure within easy reach of the primates and could easily have been bitten. This lack of supervision and physical barriers could lead to physical harm to the animals or the public.

May 8, 2019: The USDA cited Walnut Prairie Wildside for failing to demonstrate adequate knowledge and experience of the animals it maintains. The licensee was in possession of an 8-week-old tiger cub named Lily, who was acquired when she was under 2 weeks old. The licensee had never owned a big cat or received any training on raising or training a growing big cat. When the licensee originally obtained the cub, her diet was completely inappropriate—the animal was being fed too much, but the food was lacking in the necessary protein, vitamins, and minerals. At the time of inspection, the owner was conducting handling exhibitions in which the public was allowed to pick up, carry, and take photos of the cub. The inspector

observed an exhibition and noted that it was clear that the cub did not want to be picked up but the public was allowed to continue while she grunted, growled, and swatted at the faces of people holding her. The inspector told the licensee that the tiger's behavior indicated that she had had enough handling and should be taken off exhibit, but the licensee continued to stand by and watch as the handler did not correct or stop the interaction.

During other encounters with the cub, one woman picked her up and put her fingers in the cub's mouth for her photo, then dropped the cub on her head. Another woman picked up the cub and, after being swatted in the face and on the neck, she lowered the cub back down to the ground on her back, with her spine supporting her bodyweight. During these two encounters, the employee let the cub off the leash and had her back turned while a guest picked up the cub under her forelegs around the rib cage, so that her body hung down in front of the guest's body for the photo. The cub was grunting and uncomfortable, but neither the employee nor the licensee stopped the encounter. After the encounter, the employee left the cub unattended while helping the licensee with a large snake. The cub tried to go toward the 13-foot python, and the inspector had to stop the cub and get the attention of the employee to retrieve her. The cub scratched the employee on the chin when she was picked up. During another encounter, a stroller with a child in it was allowed so close that the cub could have jumped into it, and the cub was biting at the ankles of guests, including a 4-year-old girl.

The inspection report noted that the lack of proper training and experience while raising and handling a tiger could pose a serious threat of harm to the animal, employees, and the public as the cub grew and became stronger and possibly more aggressive. Per the licensee, a knowledgeable, experienced

person had come to the property on two occasions to provide training on handling the tiger. No one was available full-time on site, and the licensee did not have any plans to get further training at another facility. The licensee was correcting issues as he was told about them—however, the inability to recognize these problems himself demonstrated his lack of training in and experience with raising and handling a large, dangerous animal. Gaining experience and learning while already having a cub on site, and only while an experienced person was infrequently on site, did not meet the regulatory requirement of demonstrating adequate experience and knowledge necessary for maintaining a tiger.

The facility was also cited for failing to ensure that surfaces and furniture for the primates were constructed of materials that could readily be cleaned and sanitized and failing to sanitize primate enclosures properly at least once every two weeks. The wooden shelves and platforms for the white-headed lemurs and vervet monkeys were soiled and had gummy, brown grime stuck to the surface; the wooden walls of the white-headed lemur enclosure had muddy footprints along all the surfaces; and the walls of the vervet monkey enclosure had buildups of dirt and debris, old blood, and urine. The facility was also cited for failing to maintain enclosures in good repair, including a porcupine enclosure without a proper door, with metal sheeting used to block the door opening, which the porcupines could easily push out of the way to escape; two fox enclosures that had exposed mesh flooring with a deep hole underneath that could cause injury if the animals' feet fell through or could provide an area of escape as the fencing was pulled away in the corners; and a fennec fox enclosure that did not have a functioning lock system and had a door that was kept closed with a stick, which was not present

during the inspection, allowing the door to be opened without any effort. The facility was also cited for failing to have an adequate perimeter fence around the facility—it covered half of the property and was missing three entry gates—and failing to remove a buildup of debris from the property, including a large accumulation of various decaying carcasses, bones, skulls, and rib cages that lined a path to the lynx enclosure and could leach into the soil, posing a health risk to the lynxes and attracting pests and vermin, as well as an accumulation of feathers, bones, and feces in enclosures housing foxes, a Geoffroy's cat, lynxes, and servals. The serval enclosure also had dirt, blood, feathers, and feces on the side walls and igloo and dirty towels in the enclosure.

March 7, 2019: The USDA cited Walnut Prairie Wildside for failing to have a responsible adult available to accompany officials during an inspection.

May 9, 2017: The USDA cited Walnut Prairie Wildside for failing to have a completed 6-foot perimeter fence around an enclosure housing two lynxes to aid in the prevention of animal escape and to keep other animals and unauthorized persons out of the primary enclosure.