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JUST COOL



San Diego has its own exotic animal sanctuary, and it's offering virtual tours



Lufuno (or Louie) was 12 when he was rescued, along with lions Zulu and Arusha, three years ago when a former animal trainer relinquished the trio to Lions Tigers and Bears. He is what is known as a white lion, a rare color mutation of the Southern African lion. (Courtesy photo)

Alpine's Lions Tigers and Bears strives to survive loss of visitor income

By **DIANE BELL** COLUMNIST
APRIL 6, 2020 10:31 AM

How about a sofa safari? Lions Tigers and Bears has gone virtual.

Bobbi Brink, the founder of the exotic animal sanctuary in Alpine, is orchestrating an educational armchair activity for out-of-school students.

In the face of COVID-19, people can no longer tour the Alpine habitat where visitors provided a major source of the nonprofit facility's income.

"It's heartbreaking," Brink says. "This has affected our income for the animals. Our staff did nothing wrong, and they've lost their jobs." Brink explained that laying off six employees and reducing two more to part-time status was the hardest thing she has ever had to do. Some are still showing up to help as volunteers.

"They're so passionate here. They love the animals so much, and they understand that the animals have to come first. I'll try my hardest to rehire them," she added.



Bobbi Brink, the founder of Lions Tigers & Bears, is hosting live virtual visits to the exotic animal sanctuary on Facebook and Instagram on Wednesdays through Saturdays. (Screen grab from video tour)

Meanwhile, Brink has started offering "virtual visits" to the sanctuary, also a nonprofit educational center, on Wednesday through Saturday. Staff and volunteers are conducting 30-minute behind-the-scenes tours (with interactive Q&A time) for videocasts on [Facebook](#) live from 10:30 a.m. to 11 a.m. and on [Instagram](#) from noon to 12:30 p.m.

“Are you in the cage with them?” asked one viewer.

The answer is no, the big cats are shifted to a safety bedroom while their morning meal is put out.

In addition to rescued African lions, tigers and bears, the sanctuary is home to leopards, mountain lions, servals, bobcats and more — about 65 animals in all. Each tour will focus on a different species and individual rescue stories.

“We have to find a way to get people to know we’re here,” says Brink, who says it costs about \$4,000 a day to feed the animals and maintain the 93-acre habitat. She has added a [“Hang in There”](#) \$20 challenge fundraiser on the [Lions Tigers and Bears website](#), with a link for kids and others who want to start their own fundraiser.

The sanctuary’s first show was Wednesday and introduced its six American black bears. On Thursday, a male lion named Louie and his two female companions, Arusha and Zula, took center stage. Friday’s visit highlighted a tiger named Maverick previously owned by a rap artist.

Brink vows to continue the virtual visits each week at the same times on Wednesday through Saturday.