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Alpine animal sanctuary welcomes white tiger and 2 African wild cats as newest arrivals



Due to the Rancho Las Lomas Wildlife Foundation closing its facility in Orange County, this white tiger, Lily, and two African servals will now live out the rest of their lives at Lions, Tigers & Bears, an animal sanctuary in Alpine. (Jarrod Valliere / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

It's the first animal rescue Lions, Tigers & Bears has performed during the COVID-19 pandemic

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A white tiger and two African wild cats became the newest residents of Lions, Tigers & Bears on Tuesday, marking the first transfer of animals to the Alpine wildlife sanctuary since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Animal caretakers and staffers drove up to Orange County to pick up the tiger and two servals — African wild cats about the size of a bobcat. The animals had been living at [Rancho Las Lomas](#), a private resort used for weddings, corporate events and photo shoots, among other events.

The resort also doubled as a zoological garden, according to its [website](#), and was home to llamas, zebras, exotic birds and cats. As recently as September, the resort's [Facebook](#) page offered virtual introductions to Lily the tiger as a way to spice up video conferences during the pandemic. But the owners ultimately decided they no longer wanted to care for the animals, according to Bobbi Brink, founder of Lions, Tigers & Bears.

Lily and the two servals — Eli and Savannah — were the last three animals left on the property. Julie Smith, who cared for wildlife at Rancho Las Lomas for 14 years, accompanied them to make sure their transfer went smoothly. Standing by like a worried parent, she spoke to the cats in soft and soothing tones, coaxing them out of their transport cages and into their new enclosures. She even brought one of Lily's favorite toys: a large and hollow gray ball.

Smith says she'll sleep better knowing all three cats have found a new home. But it was still a bittersweet goodbye.

"It's all ranges of emotions. I mean, this is just an amazing place, so we feel really happy that they got to come here (and) really grateful because we know that they'll be well cared for," she said. "But it's sad to say goodbye to animals that you cared for, for a long time."

Lily, Eli and Savannah will spend the next month or two in a separate section of the sanctuary, where they'll be quarantined until they acclimate to their new surroundings. They'll eventually be moved to more permanent enclosures. The two servals are inseparable and will stay that way. Lily, like all tigers, is a solitary creature.

Veterinarians will also check the cats' health. That won't be trivial. Lily, Eli and Savannah are 18, 22 and 20 years old, respectively. And Lily suffers from severe arthritis as a result of having her claws removed. She needs several different types of medication a day, including gabapentin, a drug that people with shingles, epilepsy and diabetes often take to dull nerve pain.

"It's sad that they lost their home," Brink said. "But it's nice that they got their lifetime retirement home."

Lions, Tigers & Bears is now home to 65 animals representing 17 species, including the latest additions, according to Brink, who started the sanctuary in 2002. She adds that the facility might acquire a few more animals before the end of the year.

Many of the sanctuary's residents suffered neglect and abuse in their previous homes, but Brink is determined to give them a safe and secure place where they can spend the rest of their lives — even if that isn't very long.

It's a conviction fueled by a rock-solid belief that every living thing is precious.

"I'm definitely a Christian girl. And I believe that God is here and this place wouldn't be here without him," Brink said. "Every single one of us are God's creatures."