

Jungle Encounters

Along two country roads in the Blackstone Valley are some fascinating sites, sensations and sounds. While Southwick Zoo is well-known and beloved for its fascinating array of wildlife as New England's largest zoo, its Earth Limited (Environmental Awareness of Resources and Threatened Habitats) educational organization works to "provide environmental and conservation education with an emphasis on animal ecology, endangered species and threatened habitats".

Not too far away, along an historic country road, is another "labor of love" that serves to educate young and old alike to various wildlife as well as create awareness and help provide funding to global organizations that work to preserve wild cat species and their habitats.

Jungle Encounters was founded in 2001 after Debi Willoughby had volunteered for years at Southwick Zoo, in Southborough and at Greenville Wildlife Park in New Hampshire in the field of wild animal educational awareness. She and her husband, Ed, have their hands full 24/7 with over 60 of Ed's prized chickens, pot belly pigs, pygmy goats and mini horses spread out on part of their 8 acres in cages and in fenced areas. Ed attends chicken shows and has developed these domestic animals into a part time business while still working full time elsewhere.

But if that were not enough to handle, Debi also cares for and maintains an alligator named Bruno, an albino Ornate Horned Frog named Cosmo, 3 ferrets, Slinky, Summer and Sage and 3 African Hedgehogs, Buddy, Kiwi and Kokonut. In addition, they own and show an armadillo, rabbits, a striped skunk and chinchillas as well as 4 hissing cockroaches.

If that weren't enough to delight children and seniors alike for birthday parties, numerous events and fairs or even programs at nursing homes, other animals include:

An affectionate Savannah Cat, Hunter, who was born in 2005 and is a cross between an African Serval and a domestic cat. People started cross breeding these 2 animals so we could have a wild-looking cat with the domestic cat personality. They live 12-15 years and weigh up to 20lbs.

Two African Fennec Fox which are the smallest of all the fox. Their status of common or endangered in the wild is unconfirmed. They are omnivores who eat birds, insects and fruits. They live in colonies of up to 10 and sleep in underground dens. They are 10-16" long and live an average of 8 years in the wild. They weigh between 2-4 pounds. They are very high-strung and skiddish animals.

A friendly Ringtail cat, Bandit, who is in the Raccoon family and behaves much like our raccoons here in New England. They live from Texas to Mexico. Ringtail cats eat just about everything, but prefer meat (rodents, birds, etc). Their body is 12" long, their tail another 8". They weigh between 2-5 pounds. They live up to 15 years in captivity. Debi explained how the ring-tailed gets a cookie a day to replace the natural sugar he would generally find in the wild.

Two skiddish, timid Patagonian Cavies, Mara and Sandy. They are very curious animals who make lots of grunts and groans when they talk. You will be drawn in, like everyone else, by this unusual looking animal! They are the second largest rodent. Their habitat is in South America, eating mostly grasses and seeds. They are commonly hunted by other animals, therefore they grow quickly to full size within their first 6 months of life. Their body is 15-18" long and they weigh 20-25 pounds. They live up to 10 years in captivity.

Debi asserted that it takes close to \$2000 a month for food and maintenance as well as a very demanding daily schedule to care for her menagerie. She is careful when booking shows that the animals are not over-scheduled, often rotating which animals are brought.

After much consideration and research, Debi and Ed have decided to focus some of Jungle Encounters attention on performing a show about small wild cats to teach people about these magnificent animals, how they survive in the wild, what they prey on, their conservation issues and current projects to help protect them in the wild.

The four international fund-raising non-profits that Debi has recently become involved in to preserve habitat and cat species include many varieties of the 26 known species of wild cats most of us have never heard of, much less seen. The opportunities to save these species face some very tough challenges, but Debi is dedicated to donating a percentage of her Jungle Fund program to these four conservation projects:

1. **Choco Rainforest Protection Project** - Help save the ocelots, jaguarundis, oncillas & margays of South America!
2. **The Wild Cats of Borneo** (Cats native to Borneo are the Bay cat, marbled cat, clouded leopard, flat headed cat & leopard cat)
3. **The Guigna Project** - The Guigna is the smallest wild cat in the western hemisphere.
4. **Costa Rica** - a new small cat project to be located in Costa Rica.

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Jungle Encounters differs from Earth Ltd in that there are no on-site shows. Programs vary from 3-6 hour petting zoos to 45 minute to an hour programs, depending on need and ages of the participants.