

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 provide a sick cougar with adequate veterinary care; 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.

February 2, 2022: The USDA filed an AWA complaint against Walnut Prairie Wildside alleging multiple willful violations of the act since March 2019, including allowing an unsupervised member of the public to pick up a tiger cub, put their fingers in the animal's mouth for a photo, and then drop the cub on his or her head; leaving a tiger cub unleashed and unattended, leading the

cub to approach a python exhibit; allowing a volunteer to handle a tiger cub who then repeatedly bit and chewed at the ankles of guests, including a 4-year-old child; allowing unsupervised members of the public to approach a lynx enclosure (the lynx reached through the fencing and injured a 2-year-old child's head and arm); allowing unsupervised members of the public to put their hands into a prairie dog enclosure (a prairie dog then bit someone's finger); leaving members of the public unattended while inside enclosures with lemurs, coatimundis, and a raccoon; repeatedly exhibiting tigers without any distance or barriers between the public and the animals; allowing a volunteer to feed an adult tiger a boiled egg from the volunteer's mouth; allowing a young child to put her fingers through wire fencing to pet a cougar; failing to obtain adequate veterinary care for a cougar who was extremely thin, exhibiting signs of dehydration, suffering from diarrhea, and not eating well; and failing to obtain veterinary care for two vervet monkeys who died of unknown causes and a ring-tailed lemur who died of toxoplasmosis. The complaint stated that the licensee "exhibits an evasive attitude towards regulatory compliance" and that the licensee "continues to provide incomplete information, false statements, and a flagrant disregard for AWA requirements in communications to APHIS personnel." Despite having his AWA license suspended on June 18, 2021, for a period of 21 days, the licensee continued to violate the AWA and exhibited animals at his facility to members of the public on June 19, 2021.

The complaint also states that the licensee has a history of violations under Illinois state law, including pleading guilty in 2019 to illegally possessing an alligator without a Special Use Herptile Permit. Also, Illinois Conservation Police observed the licensee exhibiting the alligator in an enclosure that was not escape-proof and without a band

around the animal's mouth, as required by state law, and confiscated the animal on August 29, 2019. In addition, in 2019, the Illinois Conservation Police confiscated a bobcat from the licensee—the animal was improperly obtained and exhibited against state law.

November 8, 2021: During a relicensing inspection, the USDA issued Walnut Prairie Wildside repeat citations for failing to have a written program of veterinary care filled out by an attending veterinarian and failing to keep complete records of the animals on hand. A male fennec fox and a male porcupine were listed on the inventory but were not present at the facility, and there was no documentation of the locations of those animals. The facility was issued another repeat citation for failing to demonstrate adequate experience and knowledge to handle tigers and cougars. The licensee acquired two tigers and two cougars for exhibition but had not taken sufficient steps to gain essential knowledge to handle these animals, and this lack of knowledge and experience (demonstrated by many dangerous incidents documented in previous inspection reports) could result in serious injury or death to the animals, the licensee, volunteers, or members of the public.

The facility was also issued a repeat citation for outdoor facilities maintenance issues, including failing to maintain adequate perimeter fencing and failing to maintain adequate enclosure fencing to safely contain 13 piglets. During the inspection, a small piglet approximately 3 to 4 weeks old was observed outside the primary enclosure fence and then was seen entering back into the enclosure by squeezing through the mesh of the fence. The fence spacing was too large to contain the piglets, creating a risk for the piglets to become prey for other animals or get injured while going through the fence. The 8-foot perimeter fence

surrounding the facility was incomplete, leaving two sides of the facility completely open with no fence to prevent animals from escaping the property. The outdoor enclosures for two tigers and two cougars didn't have the required 8-foot perimeter fence, and the non-dangerous animals didn't have the required 6-foot-tall perimeter fence completely surrounding their enclosures. The bottom of the perimeter fence around the three badgers wasn't secured and was open for the animals to get under.

The facility was also cited for failing to clean a metal food bowl in the cat enclosure that had a large buildup of dirt and debris around the entire inside surface, which could cause possible health or disease hazards; failing to repair several wooden beams in the Japanese macaque enclosure that were chewed and had exposed raw wood, which had splinters that could potentially cause injury to the animals; and failing to provide goats with an appropriate diet. The food bowl in the enclosure for three goats contained dry dog food because the facility had run out of grain. The licensee stated that they sometimes feed the goats dog food, but there was no documentation from the attending veterinarian that advised feeding dog food to goats. There was also a large buildup of dirt, debris, and old food in the feeding receptacle for the prairie dogs. The inspection report noted that all items must be in compliance by January 7, 2022, or the licensee would have to wait six months to reapply for a license.

August 25, 2021: The USDA issued Walnut Prairie Wildside repeat citations for failing to keep completed birth records for a litter of kittens born on the property and failing to demonstrate adequate experience and knowledge to handle tigers and cougars. The licensee acquired two tigers and two cougars for exhibition but had not taken sufficient steps to gain essential knowledge

to handle them. This lack of knowledge and experience (demonstrated by many dangerous incidents documented in previous inspection reports) could result in serious injury or death to the animals, the licensee, volunteers, or members of the public. The facility was also issued a repeat citation for outdoor facilities maintenance issues, including failing to repair a gap under the entry gate of the cougar enclosure, which could allow a cougar to reach under the door and make contact with a worker, and failing to maintain adequate perimeter fencing. The 8-foot perimeter fence surrounding the facility was incomplete, leaving two sides of the facility completely open with no fence to prevent animals from escaping the property. On July 12 and 13, 2021, two caviies escaped their primary enclosure overnight and were able to leave the facility through the unfinished portion of the perimeter fence. The outdoor enclosures for two tigers and two cougars didn't have the required 8-foot perimeter fence, and the non-dangerous animals didn't have the required 6-foot-tall perimeter fence completely surrounding their enclosures. The bottom of the perimeter fence around the three badgers wasn't secured and was open for the animals to get under.

Walnut Prairie Wildside was also cited for failing to keep water sources clean and sanitary, including a water bowl in the lemur enclosure that had a moderate amount of green algae on the bottom, a black tub of water also in the lemur enclosure that had a large amount of dark green algae growth, a plastic tub in the pig and goat area that had a large amount of green algae along the bottom and sides, and a metal bowl in the lynx enclosure that contained turkey meat covered with water that had several maggots on the surface. The presence of algae and maggots could be a source of possible disease and health issues. In

addition, there was no water available in the prairie dog enclosure.

June 15, 2021: The USDA sent an official notice of a 21-day suspension of Thomas Edmonds' license to exhibit, buy, sell, or transport animals. The agency said it took this action because "[o]ur evidence reveals that, between May 9, 2017 and June 3, 2021, [Edmonds] failed to: provide adequate veterinary care, employ an attending veterinarian and maintain programs of adequate veterinary care, maintain appropriate records, allow proper access and inspection of records and property, properly handle the animals, provide adequate housing and shelter, provide potable water, provide proper sanitization, provide proper housing facilities, provide proper barriers, provide environment enhancement to promote psychological well-being, ensure proper waste disposal, provide proper fencing, and provide proper pest control."

June 3, 2021: The USDA issued a repeat citation to Walnut Prairie Wildside for not having a formal arrangement with an attending veterinarian or a written program of veterinary care.

Thomas Edmonds received repeat citations for failing to have adequate experience or knowledge to maintain tigers and cougars (there had "been many dangerous incidents, documented in previous inspection reports, that prove a lack of the necessary knowledge and experience"), failing to construct several primates' primary enclosures in a manner that allowed them to be easily cleaned and sanitized (the enclosures contained unsealed wood surfaces and had a buildup of old food, oils, or debris), failing to have the required perimeter fence, and failing to have complete animal acquisition and disposition records available for review.

The USDA also cited the facility for keeping two kittens in an unsanitary storage room that was full of dirty buckets, barrels, gas cans, a chainsaw, and “pet” carriers. Another citation was issued for failing to have a safe and effective program for the control of insects—multiple areas around the facility had an excessive number of flies.

April 29, 2021: The USDA issued a critical repeat citation to Walnut Prairie Wildside for not having formal arrangements with a veterinarian or specialist who could treat primates after two vervet monkeys died of unknown causes without receiving veterinary care. The female acted sick for a day and died that evening. The male died four days later, even though he had appeared fine. Neither had been examined by a veterinarian, because the licensee was unable to find one who could care for primates. A direct repeat citation was issued for failing to offer adequate veterinary care to Mercury, a 5-month-old cougar. He appeared very sick, uncomfortable, and extremely thin. The condition of his skin indicated a serious level of dehydration. He was very quiet and moved very little, even with humans present. He passed brownish, liquid diarrhea and had not eaten a bowl full of meat. A fecal sample had reportedly been taken the previous month, which revealed coccidia and rare amounts of tritrichomonas and strongyloides. According to the licensee, the cub was treated and seemed to be better, but he started to get sick again about three to four days before the inspection. Mercury had not been taken to the veterinarian for the second episode of illness, and the licensee stated that he was waiting for a friend who worked at the clinic to be available to go with him.

March 10, 2021: The USDA cited Walnut Prairie Wildside for not having a formal arrangement with an attending veterinarian or a written program of veterinary care. The facility was also cited for failing to supply

adequate veterinary care to a short-tailed opossum who had brown scabs covering the tips of both ears—a condition recurring since July 2020 that had not been reported to the attending veterinarian—and to two tigers, Tony and Lilly, who were obese and whose abdomens hung low past their elbows. Both tigers panted continually when they took a few steps and then lay down. The temperature was in the mid-60s. The owner said that he would “rather have the animals too heavy than too thin because people complain.”

The USDA issued Walnut Prairie Wildside repeat citations for failing to have adequate experience or knowledge to maintain adult tigers, as demonstrated by the fact that volunteers were allowed to engage in behavior that put them at risk, such as the following:

- Taking photos of themselves in the shared primary enclosure of the sexually intact male tiger (500+ lbs. Tony) and female tiger (350+ lbs. Lilly)
- Allowing the tigers to stand on their back feet with their paws on the volunteers’ shoulders as they bottle-fed them
- Feeding a tiger a boiled egg from a volunteer’s mouth
- Allowing a volunteer to be sandwiched between the male and female tigers
- Allowing a tiger to lick/mouth the head of a volunteer

The inspector noted that, “[w]hile the owner chooses to routinely partake in these risky behaviors after continuous warning of the safety risks by the USDA, he advised inspectors one year prior that he would not allow his volunteers to do what he does. The owner stated that he now feels that he has adequate knowledge/experience to train the few volunteers he allows to do these activities because he raised the tigers from cubs and the older tiger is now 2 yrs old. ... [H]is training consists of him allowing the volunteers into the primary enclosure and

watching his interactions with the tigers and talking to the volunteers.” The owner had not received any recognized training with tigers since their arrival as cubs.

A repeat citation was issued to the facility for not having sufficient barriers to prevent contact between the public and Mercury, a 4-month-old cougar, when the keeper did not have direct control over the animal. A facility volunteer took a group of adults and children to Mercury’s enclosure. A young girl put her fingers through the chicken wire to pet him. When the keeper noticed the inspectors watching, he told the group that they were being “spied on,” and an adult pushed the girl’s hand away from the cage. The girl stuck her fingers through the wire again to touch Mercury.

Walnut Prairie Wildside was cited again for allowing the public to have direct contact with a Japanese macaque named Dexter, who was not under the direct control and supervision of a trained keeper. When the macaque was used for public handling, he was allowed to move around the room, climbing on peoples’ laps and sitting on children’s shoulders in a face-to-face manner. During the encounter, the animal’s leash was not held by a keeper. A repeat citation was issued for failing to have an appropriate enrichment and enhancement plan directed by an attending veterinarian and adequate to promote the psychological well-being of primates, which was especially important for two singly housed primates.

A direct citation was issued to Walnut Prairie Wildside for failing to provide domestic cats with accessible water. An approximately 12-inch-tall bucket had about 4 inches of water inside, which the inspector noted “was too low for them to utilize, since a domestic cat will not tend to drop down over 4 inches into a container, placing their feet into the water to be able to drink.” When the licensee was asked to provide

water in a bowl, multiple cats surrounded the bowl, and three immediately drank. One of the cats, who was exhibiting signs of an upper respiratory infection, drank for five minutes while the other two drank for almost four minutes.

Walnut Prairie Wildside was also cited for failing to supply sufficient shelter for all the domestic cats in one enclosure to have protection from the elements. There were only four small nest box–type shelters for all 12 cats. Four recently obtained cats had signs of upper respiratory infections when they arrived but were placed in the outside enclosure when the owner felt they were better. One of them still exhibited signs of the infection at the time of the inspection.

The facility was further cited for failing to supply adequate shelter for the following animals:

- A Geoffroy’s cat and a prehensile-tailed porcupine were housed in primary enclosures that did not have a box or log to hide or shelter in. The porcupine’s enclosure was a corn crib, and the Geoffroy’s cat had an enclosure open on two sides with no protection from the elements.
- Five goats, a pig with four babies, and two rheas were all in the same enclosure with only one wooden shelter box that was approximately 4 feet by 8 feet and 2 feet in height.
- Two fully grown tigers were provided with one shelter box that was too small for them to fit into comfortably without having to crawl or contort themselves in order to enter it. The shelter box was shorter than the tigers and too small to allow for normal postural movements, and it did not allow them to sit, stand, or lie down comfortably. This concern had been mentioned to the licensee the previous year.

Repeat citations were also issued for failing to have complete animal acquisition and disposition records available for review; failing to construct several primates' primary enclosures in a manner allowing them to be easily cleaned and sanitized—the enclosures contained unsealed wood surfaces, chewed exposed wood, and ropes that were dark black and brown with grime; and failing to have the required perimeter fence.

December 2, 2020: The USDA cited Walnut Prairie Wildside for failing to have a documented plan for environmental enhancement and enrichment adequate to promote the psychological well-being of primates. The facility had two singly housed monkeys who did not have stimuli from other primates, and there was no plan to improve their psychological well-being. The facility was also cited for failing to have a barrier around the primary enclosures of the white-headed lemurs and the Japanese macaque necessary to restrict physical contact between the primates and the public.

Walnut Prairie Wildside was also cited for failing to have the required perimeter fence around many of the enclosures and for failing to have records of animal acquisition and disposition available for review during the inspection.

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.