

# Touching the Tiger

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Lions and Tigers Serenade the Moon in Nevada's wild, open Lahontan Valley. By John Burkitt

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**Nala, like most lions, relaxes 20 hours out of every 24. But for the other four hours...watch out!**

I stared impatiently into my viewfinder while the lioness lay stretched out serenely in the grass, a queen among cats and regally detached from the peasant filming her. “Come on, Nala,” I thought, “DO something.” Since that time, I’ve learned that lions are always doing something, and they are busiest when laying absolutely still. In half a heartbeat, the 400 pound cat roused herself, lunged forward and dealt the camera a genuine Joltin’ Joe DiMaggio home run special with her powerful

forearm. I learned later that camera baseball is one of Nala’s favorite games. The camcorder and I survived, and I show the footage to young wannabes that think they can waltz in and “pet the kitties” at Tiger Touch, our big cat sanctuary.

An exotic enclave in the middle of Nevada’s dry Lahontan Valley, Tiger Touch is remarkably like the open savanna land where Nala’s wild cousins roam. The more affluent locals show off their wealth with a grassy lawn, but most folk learn to love the sage and sand. Nala likes sage and sand just fine—like her it is basic, wild and strangely beautiful.

Nala shares her ample enclosure with her mate Rocky the Lion and friend Detonator, a Bengal Tiger. Their ménage-a-trois surprises many people who are used to seeing lions in groups but not tigers. “Surprises are good,” according to Director John Williamson. “They shake out preconceived notions, prompting people to see and think for themselves.” Williamson keeps a growing list of exceptional behaviors he’s witnessed, though after years of watching he’s realized that the exceptions are the rule. His writings portray a richness of feline culture that eludes the casual visitor:

*“Nala, being a female, provokes her chosen mate, Rocky, at every opportunity until in a fit of frustration, he chases her down a dead end corridor where he intends to thoroughly thrash her. But true to her inventive nature, she now waits till he’s almost on*

*her, then she jumps seven feet in the air over him. He left pawing the air and fuming even more. Being a male lion is not an easy job.”*

There is more to this chronicle than impressing visitors. John and his wife Barbara have become very aware of how complex and important these cats’ social lives are. They are passionate about the care their cats receive, and that passion fuels their efforts to change the conventional wisdom about cat care, something John calls “far more conventional than wise.” He has secured the support of influential behaviorists such as Dr. James W. Prescott, writer of the landmark documentary, “Rock-a-bye Baby.”

“As the wild places shrink, the human habitat will be the only place left for exotic cats to survive in numbers.” John Williamson says with a sigh. “It must be a place worth living. When we bring life into the world, we owe it health, joy and contentment.” Williamson spent much of his young life exploring the unspoiled places of wild Earth and had witnessed their steady retreat from uncontrolled “progress.” While he wants to see the angels of our better nature trump our destructive side, he is not optimistic. “By the time we



**The “Three Musketeers.” From left to right, Nala (lioness), Detonator (Bengal tiger), Rocky (lion).**

come to our senses, I doubt there will be any big cats left in the wild.” He adds with an admonishing nod, “Maybe I won’t live to see that day, but you will. When it happens, a rubber ball and rope won’t be enough ‘enrichment’ for these survivors. They’ll need love. They’ll need a Tiger Touch.” As if to underscore his point, he went to Niki Tigress whose enclosure adjoined the business office. Carefully but confidently he reached through the large openings in the heavy wire and rubbed the back of Niki’s head. The tigress pushed her head closer, closed her eyes and moaned with approval as his fingers worked through her fur. “This is real enrichment,” John said. “Anything less than loving touch is life imprisonment with benefit of toys.”

Niki Tigress is one of five cats that prefer to live indoors. The indoor cats makes their presence known in many ways, from the careful choice of furnishings to the thin layer of dust that coats everything in the office complex. Niki stirs up a great deal of dust when she plays like a cub in her fresh load of hay. My neatness instinct, honed by a lifetime around fine antiques, made me reach for a rag. I tried to clean some of the more expensive computer equipment.

“Leave it,” John said with an amused smile. “It will only come back.” Hmm, what a lame excuse! It never worked with my mother and it didn’t impress me. Seeing my dismay, he added, “We had to decide whether to live with cats or a clean house. And a clean house was never a life changing experience.” Touché! The rag went back in the drawer to stay.

To say that the cats were a life changing experience was the understatement of the year. John and Barbara Williamson gave up more than a clean house for their furry family—they left behind travel, sleeping late, and leisure time. Their unselfish devotion brings them out in heat of August and the snows of January. They are what many people in their 60s are today—parents again. But these “kids” will never outgrow the need for parental care. Sanctuary life is not for every human, but then it wasn’t designed to be. Everything at Tiger Touch revolves around the cats, since homeless animals share none of the blame for their woes. “When we bring life into the world,” John repeats, “we owe it health, joy and contentment.” As long as people like John and Barbara Williamson walk the earth, that debt will be serviced, though it will take more help from society to pay it completely. Sadly, many cats must be turned away. With every downturn in the economy, the problem compounds. How should we as a society deal with it?



**Director John Williamson with Missy Cougar in happier days. Missy was a dedicated Ambassador From the Wild, calling many humans out of their self-imposed exile from nature. You can still feel her presence at Tiger Touch.**

John Williamson has an answer. Once again he rejects conventional wisdom. “Ban laws to remove all the exotic animals from cities, counties or states are the trend, but they are not the answer.” He cites that cash-strapped zoos are running their ‘Species Survival Plans’ in leftover money and spare cages, and that much tiger and lion habitat is ‘protected’ by a few game officers spread thinly across some of the world’s poorest countries. Don’t get him wrong—he is quick to point out

that big cats are not for everyone. Only those who can and will make a good life for them for up to a twenty year lifespan should sign that check—the first of many. Still, he insists, “Some people want to keep [exotic animals] all in the wild. When they can guarantee me a wild, that’s one thing. For now we must invite them into our world, the only world that’s not going away.” He looked back at Niki Tigress and spoke as if to her. “We need all the genetic diversity we can hold onto, not management for extinction. Hold owners responsible, mandate humane treatment, but don’t make them outlaws.” Perhaps that was not spoken like an average man, but the cats are all glad he’s no average man. Niki came back to the fence, pushing her face against the wire once more.

“Excuse me,” John said, “I’m needed.”

Indeed he is. **\*\***

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