

Confessions of a Cat-O-Holic

By John Williamson, Edited by John Burkitt

In The Beginning:

When we first went to rescue several big cats, we found them in separate cages so we kept them apart when they first arrived at Tiger Touch. Nevertheless, these cats were murderous to one another and sadly bored. Every day we would take one of the cats out for a run in the compound and provided other enrichment as well. This went on for two years with no change so we decided on a bold experiment, one where we removed all their collars and took the doors off their cages. At first, their energy went into fighting or avoiding contact. Within a year, however, they began visiting each other's cages. We had also improved their diet substantially. Our consultant said that, from our observations, the cats were developing richer interconnections within the brain. We believe it. Today, the compound cats show the beginnings of a "culture," cementing their communal bonds by sharing one another's food, with play, and in hanging out together for quiet time. They are content now, free of stress, and they provide their own enrichment with joint undertakings. The following anecdotes are insights from their life together.

Dining Etiquette:

During breakfast, it is customary for Barbara to carry a big pail around the cat compound collecting droppings. For two days in a row, Kicky Cougar became quite pushy in wanting to examine the pail's contents and would not stop pestering Barbara. Both times, Nala the Lioness interrupted her eating to go intervene between Barbara and Kicky. She gently pushed Kicky away, then guarded Barbara until Kicky left the scene.

Every morning before breakfast, Nala, Rocky the Lion, and Detonator the Tiger put on an intense show of their play abilities. Usually, it takes effort and patience to get them to their food. Not so with Kicky, who does her best to herd them up. After all, she's in charge of the compound (ask her) and things must be organized to Cougar standards.

When we first got Niki Tigress, she could not be approached at all with food around. Then she initiated hand feeding of red meat snacks, one bit at a time. Finally she insisted on being hand fed while laying on her back. We wonder what her next invention will be. She is quite a challenging cat.

Once John went out to the compound to "water the tiger" and pick up food pans, only to see Nala wake from what seemed like sleep, leap up, run thirty feet and take a flying magpie right out of the air. He had seen cougars do this and knew that servals did it for a living, but was shocked to see a 400 pound lion do it. He resolved to be more careful with Nala after that.

Hard Work and Horseplay:

One morning, John was treated to a completely harmless mauling by Nala. Cameraman Michael Kolbert was out at dawn to photograph the big cats at play before breakfast. John and Barbara arrived shortly thereafter, did their morning love and kisses and went about delivering trays of food to each cat. Michael, at one end of the compound was trying to get some nice shots of Nala "killing" her large plastic barrel but she wasn't putting on her usual morning show. John tried to get her to perform her special antics within range of the camera by talking to her in body language he thought said "go play over there." He messed up and clearly told her "let's play here." Big difference. So when he took food in the compound, Nala ignored breakfast, swatted him, tried to trip him, held on, and proceeded to chew vigorously on my his, thrilled that she could finally play with him. Pummeling and biting is, of course, her kind of play. Barbara and Michael came running to the rescue as he tried to explain to Nala that he had made a mistake, would she please let him go. True to her nature, she did. John explained to the folks that despite appearances of savagery, there was never any danger and, in fact, he had hardly felt anything. There was not a mark on his bare legs. Thankfully, Nala was an expert at what she did and she was so proud of her skills. Naturally, Michael wasn't positioned right with his cameras...

When there are people watching who seem interested enough, Nala will often orchestrate some sort of performance to entertain them. Recently, this had taken the form of Kicky starting off on a walk around the compound... Nala then came up behind and moved over her, leaving Kicky walking along under her. Both were synchronized and it was the most hilarious behavior anyone had ever seen. Sort of a Mutt and Jeff vaudeville routine in slow motion. An earlier version of that play would begin with Nala running along, then Kicky racing after her and diving under her. This usually ended with much tripping of one another. Unfortunately, we've never been able to get a picture of this.

Nala, being a female, provokes her chosen mate, Rocky, at every opportunity until in a fit of frustration, he chases her, in the lead of course, 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 jumps seven feet in the air over him. He's then left pawing the air and fuming even more. Being a male lion is not an easy job.

Often, with visiting children Cougar Kicky stalks in Cougar fashion some delectable kid. One day Lioness Nala decided to teach Kicky to stalk like a lioness. It was quite hilarious as side by side, back and forth with exaggerated slinky movements, Kicky finally learned how to do it right. The kid thought it was funny too.

One night recently, our other Michael (we are blessed with two of them), while walking out to the compound to watch the lions bellowing, heard a strange sound seemingly associated with the usual roars from Nala and Rocky. Getting close enough to sort it out he discovered Cougar Kicky teamed up with the lions, tense, neck stretched out, doing the best she could to match

those awesome roars. Such a trio! Detonator seemed to think they were all a trifle nuts and wandered off somewhere.

My Brother's Keeper:

John enjoys Nala's protection, which has helped him many times. We have a two gate "airlock" for access to the compound which is only large enough to support a little table where we deliver breakfast from. Now and then, while collecting empty pans from the compound, Cougar Kicky comes into the "airlock" for a "look around." One morning, John deviated from the usual routine, having picked up Kicky's pan without her permission. This irked her and she decided to punish John by biting his leg. That was no fun for John, so he held her by the scruff of the neck while trying to move her out of the "airlock." That quickly escalated into a more serious fight. While so occupied, the next thing John knew, Nala had pushed her way in and taken control of Kicky to get her off him. That was good news but then he was in this small "cage" with a pissed off Cougar and a huge Lioness milling around. With Kicky finally out of the way, Nala decided she had to have a look around too. While he was wondering what would happen next, she discovered the fire extinguisher. What a find! She picked it up and proudly carried it off to HER territory for leisurely examination. The lesson learned: always get permission from anything stronger and faster than you are before you take their "possession."

From the Mouths of Cats:

In 1999 and 2000, as part of his ongoing animal studies, director Fred Donaldson worked with Nala on what he describes as a universal language among most all large mammals: a common language, whereby us humans can communicate effectively with many animals and they, in turn, can communicate with us. Exciting stuff, and it really works. In the event, we noticed recently that Nala seemed to be conducting some sort of school with the other cats in the compound. Sure enough, she was laying out the rudiments of what she had learned — that they could all communicate to some degree with their favorite people. This "classwork" went on for about two weeks. Next, Nala, Detonator, and Rocky, to a lesser extent, greeted us each morning for a "discussion" and were delighted that we understood and returned their overtures. For some reason, cougar Kicky ignored the entire scene. She has her own ways, it would seem.