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Police Kill Dozens of Animals Freed on Ohio Reserve



Jay Laprete/Getty Images

At least one animal was killed by a car after lions, a tiger, bears and wolves were freed from a wildlife preserve on Wednesday in Zanesville, Ohio.

By GREG BISHOP and TIMOTHY WILLIAMS

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ZANESVILLE, Ohio — The woman's voice sounded a little annoyed. "There's a bear and a lion out," she told the 911 operator on Tuesday. "Right up behind us."

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Come again? the operator said. "Yeah," the caller replied. "They're chasing Terry's horses."

Both the woman and the operator seemed surprisingly calm considering that it was not merely a bear and a lion but 56 exotic creatures — a fierce menagerie that included wolves, monkeys and 18 Bengal tigers, an endangered species whose numbers total less than 3,000 in the wild — that had fled their cages on a 73-acre private reserve. Friends described the couple who ran it as animal lovers, but they also had a history of run-ins with the authorities.

By late Wednesday, a day after the hunt began, the

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A tractor carried a carcass for burial at the Muskingum County Animal Farm on Wednesday in Zanesville, Ohio.

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Sheriff Matt Lutz of Muskingum County with Jack Hanna of the Columbus Zoo, who defended the animals' killings.



The New York Times

authorities in this central Ohio city of 25,000 said they had killed or captured all but one of the animals, a monkey. It had not been seen all day, and officials believed that it might have been killed by one of the other animals, said Tom Staf, assistant director of operations at the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium.

The creatures had been freed on the reserve, a few miles west of downtown Zanesville, after one of the owners apparently cut open their wire cages or opened the doors and then fatally shot himself, the authorities said.

The animals' release set off a day of tense watches, frantic searches and a news media frenzy in the rain-soaked hills along Interstate 70 an hour's drive east of Columbus.

And while there were multiple sightings of wild animals on farmland in and around Zanesville, there were no reports of any people being attacked.

Terry Thompson, 62, who officials said let the animals out, had assembled the exotic collection, creature by creature, with his wife, largely out of their love of wild animals, friends said. But there had been trouble in their lives: Mr. Thompson was released from a federal prison three weeks ago after a serving a year for possessing illegal firearms, and friends said he and his wife were estranged.

The creatures were eventually hunted down and killed by Muskingum County sheriff's deputies and other law enforcement officials — at first with handguns, and later with assault rifles — as the animals wandered the property or ventured out of nearby woods.

At least 49 had been killed by Wednesday afternoon, most of them within 500 yards of their pens, including 17 lions and at least one animal described as a big cat that was hit by a car as it tried to cross a street. It was later euthanized by the authorities.

Six other animals — three leopards, a grizzly bear and two monkeys — were shot with tranquilizer darts and sent to the Columbus Zoo, where they were placed under quarantine. And various species of monkeys, found alive in cages inside the Thompson house, were also spared.

Mr. Thompson's wife, Marian, arrived at the property on Wednesday and pleaded with officials not to kill her animals.

Jack Hanna, the director emeritus of the Columbus Zoo, was helping the authorities at the scene and said that Ms. Thompson had begged them, "Please don't take my babies," as they tracked down the wild creatures.

Animal rights advocates criticized the Muskingum County Sheriff's Department for killing so many of the animals, but [Sheriff Matt Lutz took pains](#) on Wednesday to illustrate the danger of using nonlethal force in such circumstances.

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He said that a veterinarian had tried to shoot a fleeing Bengal tiger with a tranquilizer dart, but that it either missed or only enraged the 300-pound animal. "It just went crazy," Sheriff Lutz said. "We had to put it down."

The sheriff described some of the animals that had been killed as "mature, very big, aggressive" with "high potential" for being dangerous to humans. "We could not have animals running loose in this county," he said. "We could not have that."

The Sheriff's Department shut down all roads leading to Mr. Thompson's sprawling farm, where most of the animals were kept in pens and cages at the top of a hill, although some were also in the garage and in the house. Neighbors gathered at the blockade, more excited than frightened about the unusual proceedings in their normally quiet town, perhaps best known as the birthplace of the Western writer Zane Grey. Schools were closed for the day out of fear that children might be attacked.

Mr. Thompson, who had run afoul of the law dozens of times over questions of whether his animals were being fed regularly and kept in sanitary conditions, pleaded guilty to federal charges in April 2010 of possessing eight illegal firearms — five automatic weapons and three short-barreled guns whose serial numbers had been filed off, according to court documents.

He spent a year and a day in prison, said Fred Alverson, a spokesman for the United States attorney's office in Columbus. (It was unclear who took care of the animals while Mr. Thompson was imprisoned.) When he was arrested, federal agents confiscated more than 100 firearms from the property, and they believed he had been illegally selling the weapons, according to documents filed in federal court in Columbus.

The Thompsons also had liens of about \$56,000 for back taxes and penalties from the Internal Revenue Service, records showed.

Local law enforcement officials said they repeatedly visited the Thompson farm after receiving complaints, but could do little more than make sure that Mr. Thompson had the proper permits for keeping the animals. He did.

"We've handled numerous complaints, numerous inspections," Sheriff Lutz said. "This has been a huge problem for us."

Dave Sacks, a spokesman for the United States Department of Agriculture, said that under the federal Animal Welfare Act, the agency monitors exotic animal owners only if they exhibit the animals to the public for compensation.

"The rub in Ohio is that U.S.D.A. does not regulate that sanctuary because Mr. Thompson does not exhibit his animals to the public for compensation," Mr. Sacks said.

Will Travers, the chief executive of [Born Free USA](#), a nonprofit advocacy group that supports wild animals and opposes the exotic pet trade, said that Ohio is one of only eight states that do not regulate exotic animals. It did briefly after a bear mauling, but Gov. John Kasich allowed the ban to expire.

"Ohio has a particularly bad record when it comes to exotics," Mr. Travers said.

Although many details remained unclear, the authorities described a chaotic, bloody scene on Tuesday after deputies first responded to two 911 calls about Mr. Thompson's animals running free — not an unusual occurrence.

But when deputies arrived about 5:30 p.m. , they were confronted by several of the animals.

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Sheriff Lutz said that with night falling he had little choice but to give his deputies permission to shoot. They do not normally carry tranquilizer darts, he said.

During the height of the confusion on Tuesday night, Sheriff Lutz said, it was unclear how many animals had been killed. "When they're shooting animals in all directions, it's hard to keep track," he said.

On Wednesday, he told reporters that his officers were unprepared to deal with large, frightened animals. "I had deputies that had to shoot with sidearms," Sheriff Lutz said. "These are 300-pound Bengal tigers that we had to put down."

Once the extent of the danger to his deputies became apparent, he said, deputies were given high-powered rifles and stationed in the beds of pickup trucks, where they shot the animals as they cornered them.

During the night, deputies found Mr. Thompson's body in the driveway of the house with a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

The authorities and friends of Mr. Thompson said most of the animals had been purchased legally at local auctions. One friend, Quentin Krouskoupf, 38, said that at one point Mr. Thompson had owned two lions that had belonged to the boxer Mike Tyson.

As rain poured down on Wednesday, Mr. Hanna of the Columbus Zoo defended the sheriff's actions. "What was he supposed to do?" he asked.

To the sheriff, though, the pressure of the previous 24 hours was evident. "It's just terrible," he said. "These killings were senseless. It was nonsense. It was crazy."

Mr. Krouskoupf also found no sense in the tragedy. Mr. Thompson had loved his animals, Mr. Krouskoupf said. It was inconceivable to him that Mr. Thompson had freed them, knowing what would happen. "He would have known if he let them out they would be killed."

Greg Bishop reported from Zanesville, Ohio, and Timothy Williams from New York. Leslie Kaufman and J. David Goodman contributed reporting from New York, and Barclay Walsh contributed research.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: October 19, 2011

An earlier version of this article misspelled Zanesville as Zainesville. It also misspelled Jack Hanna's surname as Hannah.

A version of this article appeared in print on October 20, 2011, on page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Ohio as Veld: Wild Animals Hunted Down.

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