

Cat's Cradle

Wellington sanctuary offers home to exotic felines

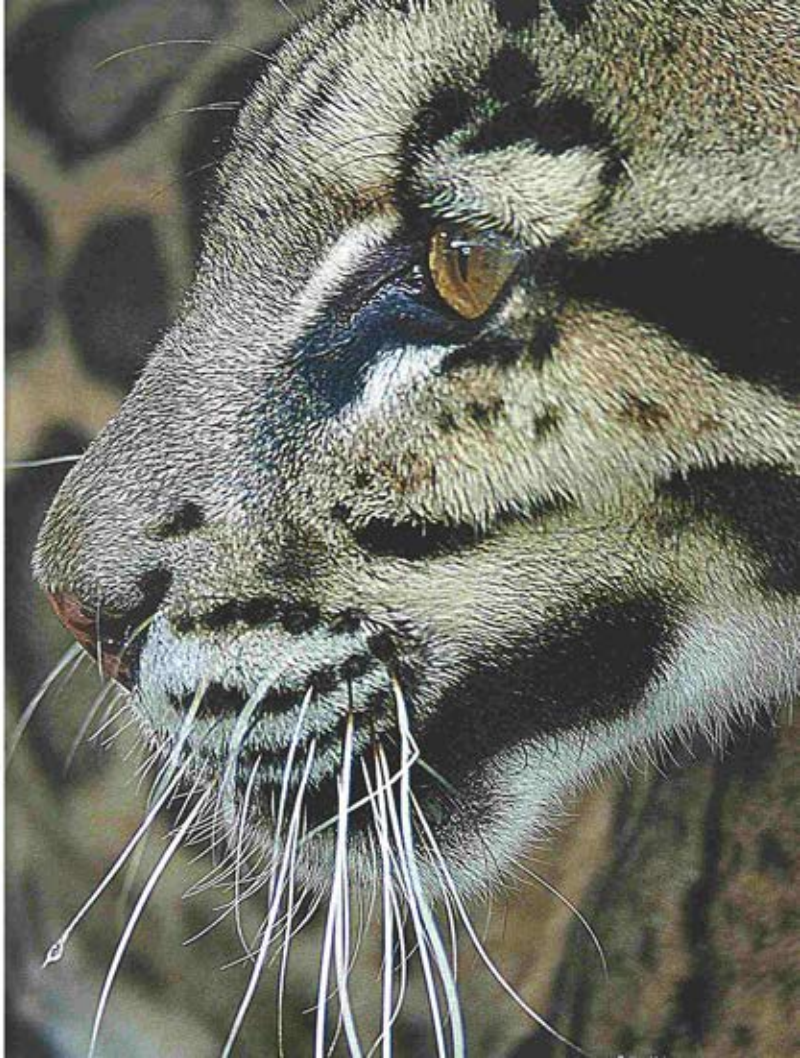
WRITTEN BY REBECCA STRAUSS PHOTOS COURTESY OF PANTHER RIDGE CONSERVATION CENTER

Owner Judy Berens, giving a cuddle to Ming, a clouded leopard



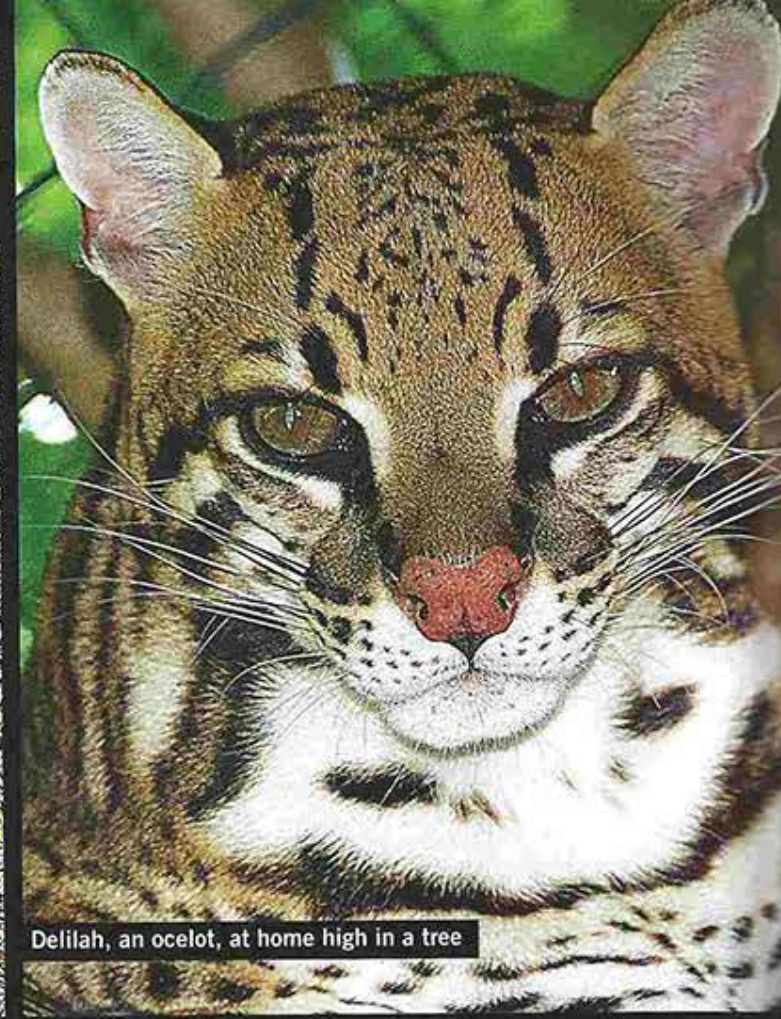
JUST SOUTH OF WELLINGTON, YOU'LL FIND AN UNLIKELY HIDDEN GEM ON 19 TROPICAL ACRES: PANTHER RIDGE Conservation Center, home to 17 exotic felines that have been abandoned, abused or neglected. The sanctuary bills itself as "a cat habitat, part haven, and part labor of love." And no one who speaks to Judy Berens, founder and director of the facility, can doubt the veracity of that last claim. She has dedicated her life to caring for these animals, starting Panther Ridge in 1999, a few years after she applied for a state license to have a small exotic cat as a personal pet. "After some years, people began to call me about exotic cats that were in bad situations, asking if I could help," she says. "The state of Florida would also call if they had to confiscate an animal and had nowhere to place it. My small family of felines became larger, and soon it was time to find a location with more space."

These days, eight species, from two small African servals to Amur the black leopard, call Panther Ridge Home. They arrived

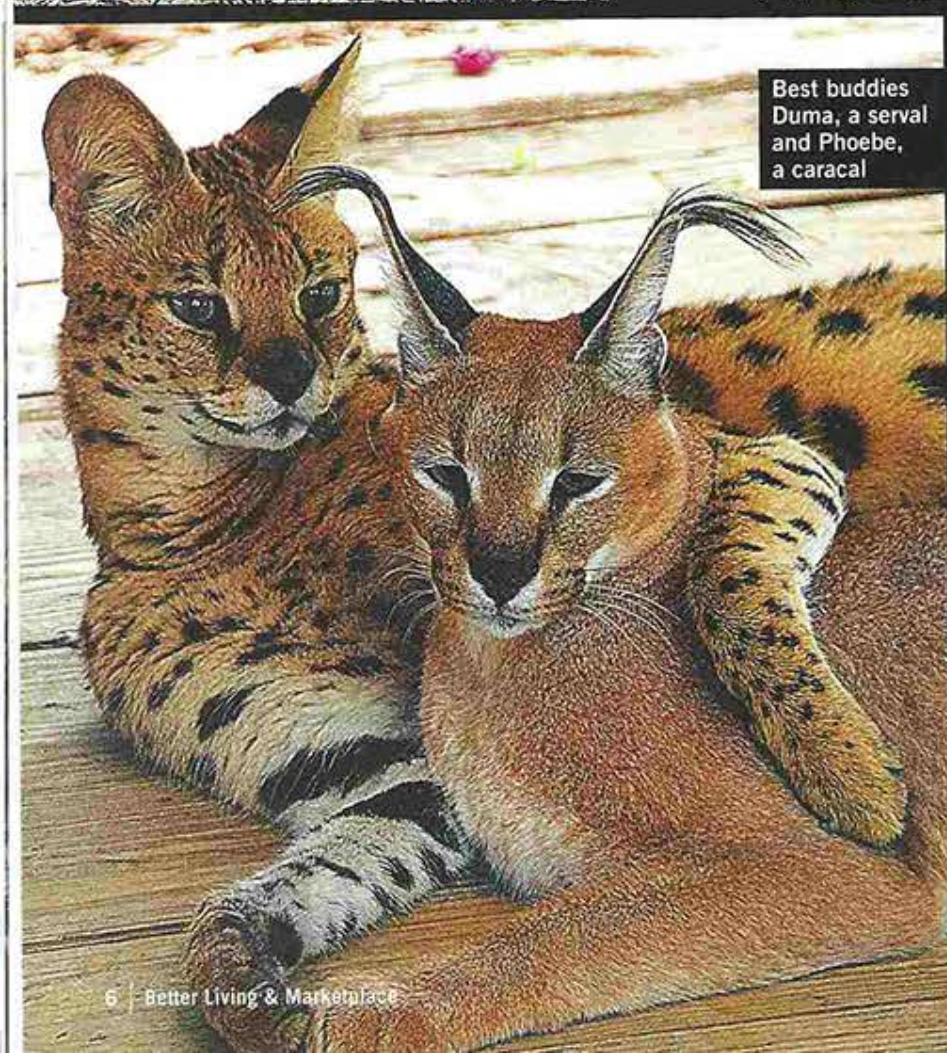




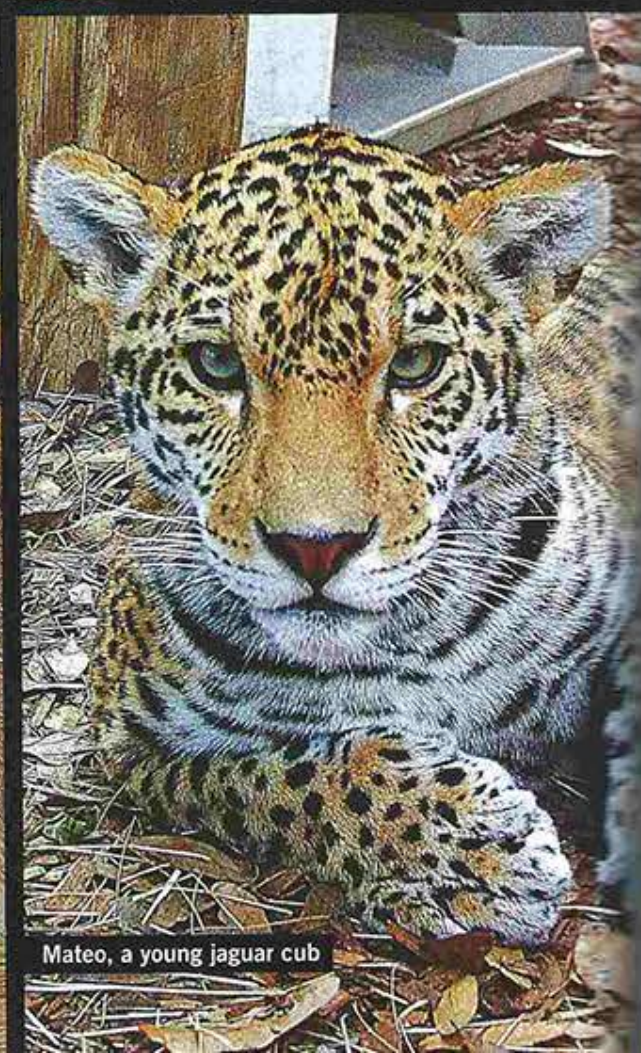
Amos the black leopard



Delilah, an ocelot, at home high in a tree

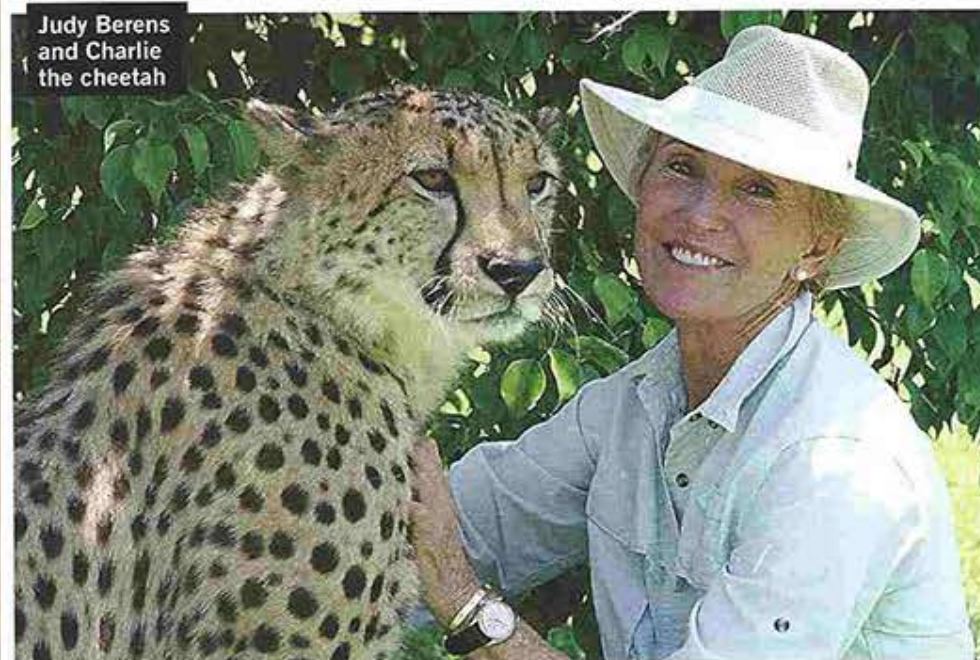


Best buddies
Duma, a serval
and Phoebe,
a caracal



Mateo, a young jaguar cub

Judy Berens
and Charlie
the cheetah



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in a variety of ways. "Some of the cats are surrendered to us, others are confiscations and some have been retired by responsible zoos or zoological parks," Berens says. "They come to us at all ages — the oldest one we took in was 19 when she arrived. She lived three more years, and had joy for the first time in her life...it really makes you feel good." Once a cat arrives at the sanctuary, it will stay there for the rest of its life. "It will never again need a home, or be at risk of neglect or mishandling," says Berens.

As for their habitat, each of the cats has its own enclosure, for the most part, since most species of felines are solitary. Although "occasionally we have cats that arrive as pairs, and they do live together," says Berens. Enclosures are all larger than what's required by the state of Florida, and "each one is full of enrichment items, climbing structures and water features to keep the cats entertained," says Berens. "Keepers do daily training with the cats to work on their mental alertness and need to play."

One of the undisputed stars of Panther Ridge is Charlie the cheetah, who has over two acres to himself. Born in South Africa in 2005, as a third-generation cat born in

captivity, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service allowed his import as an "ambassador cat." These days, visitors to Panther Ridge encounter Charlie first, who often patrols the outer boundaries of his two-acre enclosure, evaluating the visiting humans and often greeting them with an audible chirp when they arrive. Panther Ridge is the only place in a three-county area where you can see a cheetah, and he'll loudly purr for you, just four feet away from the viewing area.

Aside from offering a home to cats in need, one of the sanctuary's primary missions is education, according to Berens, both about the cats in her care and the larger conservation issues facing wildlife in general.

"We are committed to educating the public about the pressures on wildlife all over the world, while focusing on our amazing cats," she says. "Of the eight species that call PRCC home, many of them are considered endangered. We strive to connect people with wildlife through our educational and entertaining tours."

To that end, Panther Ridge works cooperatively with other conservation centers around the world and shares information with them regarding the cats' daily lives, such

as nutrition, medical care and behavior.

Although Panther Ridge doesn't accept drop-in visitors, it does offer — and encourage — guided tours by appointment. Knowledgeable guides and interns lead guests from enclosure to enclosure, where they'll learn about each of Panther Ridge's residents. The standard tour is about an hour, and costs \$25 per person (minimum four adults). For a real treat, Berens herself leads a director's tour of the sanctuary she so lovingly built, offering visitors an in-depth glimpse into the lives of the cats. Lasting around two hours, the director's tour costs \$100 per adult. School groups can also visit the cats and learn about them, and broader conservation issues, in a much more intimate setting than a zoo.

As you can imagine, caring for 17 large cats is not cheap. "We raise money by giving tours, and through the generosity of donors who become benefactors or sponsors of individual cats," says Berens. "Even corporations or businesses can step up to support one of our magnificent cats for a year." Funding is always an issue for the sanctuary, especially when food costs alone are over \$36,000 per year. Basic enclosure maintenance runs another \$25,000, and there are veterinary expenses besides.

If you can't make it to Panther Ridge to see the cats for yourself, you can still help the facility keep functioning smoothly. Berens makes no profit whatsoever off the sanctuary; any funds received go directly to the animals' care. From \$25 to \$250, the website lets visitors see what their vital donations can cover — everything from feeding a cougar for three days, to buying a heavy-duty chew toy for a big cat, to sponsoring construction of a new habitat. Whether you visit Panther Ridge yourself or just send a chew toy, this labor of love is a true cat-conservation oasis.



Rebecca Strauss is a freelance travel writer based in Michigan. She's worked in the travel-journalism field for over 10 years, writing for publications such as *Caribbean Travel and Life*, *Florida Travel and Life*, *Fodor's*, and *USA Today*. She's now the editor of *ScubaDiverLife.com*, traveling around the world writing stories on scuba diving and the ocean environment.