



ERIK NASARENKO

VENTURA COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY

NEWS RELEASE



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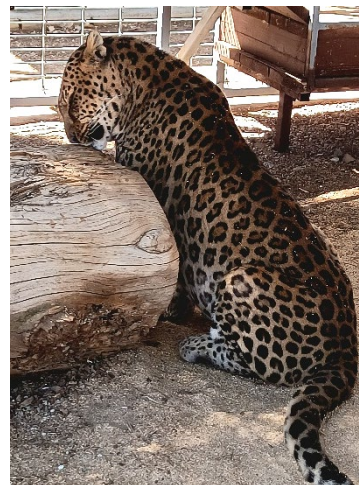
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Sanctuary Ordered to Pay Penalties for Housing Exotic Animals Without Permit

VENTURA, Calif. – Ventura County District Attorney Erik Nasarenko announced today that the Ventura County Superior Court has approved a stipulated judgment resolving violations committed by Born to Be Free, Inc., an animal sanctuary operating in Frazier Park, for the unpermitted possession of multiple restricted species. The judgment imposes a permanent injunction, civil penalties, and reimbursement of investigative costs to the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW).

“This judgment reinforces the importance of California’s restricted species requirements and the responsibility that comes with caring for exotic animals,” said District Attorney Erik Nasarenko. “Our office is grateful for the partnership with the Department of Fish and Wildlife and for the thorough work that led to this resolution.”



In early 2025, CDFW learned that Born to Be Free had taken possession of numerous restricted species, including lions, leopards, a bear, and other carnivores. Prior to incorporating her business on March 3, 2025, owner Rhea Gardner had already accepted the transfer of exotic animals from another organization. Gardner later told investigators she believed she could possess the animals under a permit held by the property’s former restricted species permittee, despite not having applied for a permit of her own. Restricted Species Permits (RSP) are non-transferable.



On March 3, 2025, CDFW received multiple complaints that restricted animals were being housed at the site without proper authorization. A consent inspection conducted on March 18 confirmed that Born to Be Free was in possession of 15 restricted species, including African lions,

leopards, a leopard–tiger hybrid, a lion–tiger hybrid, warthogs, a serval, a fishing cat, a European brown bear, and a wolf–dog hybrid. Born to Be Free did not possess a valid permit for any of these animals. CDFW Lieutenant Trevor Pell, a Restricted Species Investigative Specialist with the agency’s Special Operations Unit, completed the investigation and forwarded his findings to the District Attorney’s Office.



“California’s restricted species laws exist for a reason – these animals require specialized care, secure facilities, and experienced handlers,” said Nathaniel Arnold, CDFW Deputy Director and Chief of Law Enforcement. “Meeting permit requirements is essential to protect the public, safeguard native wildlife, and ensure these animals receive proper care.”

Under California law, a Restricted Species Permit must be obtained before importing, possessing, or caring for any restricted species. Permit qualifications ensure that caretakers have the necessary experience, that facilities meet rigorous safety standards, and that exotic animals do not endanger public safety, native wildlife, or agricultural interests.

Under the final judgment, Born to Be Free, Inc. is required to:

- Comply with a permanent injunction prohibiting the possession of restricted species without a valid RSP.
- Pay a civil penalty of \$10,000.
- Reimburse CDFW \$40,000 for investigative costs and relocation of the animals.
- Pay the \$435 court filing fee.

The total financial obligation under the judgment is \$50,435.

All restricted species were safely removed from the Born to Be Free facility on May 21 and 22, 2025, with assistance from the United States Department of Agriculture. The animals were relocated to multiple fully licensed and accredited sanctuaries across the country, including several facilities accredited by the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries. These placements ensure the animals now reside in appropriate long-term care environments that meet all state and federal standards.

