

Wild animals evacuated due to fire in LA, return home

July 28 2016, by Veronique Dupont



A Siberian tiger named Tyson roams his cage moments before being returned to his enclosure at the Wildlife Waystation in Sylmar, California on July 27, 2016

Kuba the tiger paces in his cage, pawing at the metal floor and growling. He's in a bad mood.

A huge wildfire in suburban Los Angeles forced his evacuation Friday from Wildlife Waystation, an animal reserve.

It was only the second time in 50 years that this had happened.

Now, under a grueling sun, Kuba and the other critters were headed home.

"You have to stay behind the fence. Kuba got too hot. He's not so happy about what's going on," warns Martine Colette, founder of the reserve tucked away in the mountains of Angeles National Park, about a 45 minute drive from Los Angeles.

It is home to hundreds of [wild animals](#): big cats, monkeys, bears, exotic birds, wolves, zebras and more.

The so-called Sand fire scorched 150 square kilometers (58 square miles) of forest and brush, killed one person and destroyed 18 buildings including some on a ranch that served as sets for movies and TV shows.

The return home to the animal refuge unfolded Wednesday.

Each cage was hoisted off a truck by around six people, then taken on a cart towards the animal's enclosure, where they were released.

Some needed a nudge.

"Tessa, come on, baby girl,!" an employee yells to a female Bengal tiger.



A Siberian tiger named Kimbo is transported in a cage back to her enclosure upon return at the Wildlife Waystation in Sylmar, California on July 27, 2016, a few days after animals, some large and exotic, were evacuated due to the Sand Fire

Tessa does not budge, then suddenly jumps out of the cage into her fenced off pen and scurries off to seek cover.

Nearby, bears lounge around in their cages, monkeys swing and parrots squawk. A lion named Ibsik watches stoically from a wooden perch.

- Animals are 'philosophical'

The fire not only forced the evacuation of some 20,000 people in this rural region some 50 kilometers (30 miles) from Los Angeles but also that of hundreds of animals: horses and cattle from many ranches, and wild animals from reserves and companies that provide them for shooting movies in Hollywood.

Eric Weld, a friend of Colette, runs Hollywood Animals, which supplies animals for flicks.

At first he took in some of the animals evacuated from Waystation. But when the winds shifted and the flames started coming his way, he had to send them packing again.

"I said, 'I hate to be a bad host but you'll have to go somewhere else,'" Weld said as he helped carry the cages.

Shambala Preserve, an animal sanctuary founded by actress Tippi Hedren and located not far from the town of Sylmar, narrowly escaped being forced to evacuate its animals. The Hollywood Reporter had reported that most of its animals were in fact moved.

"You see, you smell, you know what it is and you're frightened," said Colette, who has been crazy about wild animals since she was a child.

"But people in this facility are not going to spend a lot of time being frightened. They have work to do," said Colette, 74, who had to deal with this crisis shortly after having undergone knee surgery.



A mixed Siberian-Bengali tiger named Kuba steps out of a cage back to his enclosure upon return to the Wildlife Waystation in Sylmar, California on July 27, 2016

Using social media, she mobilized friends, employees and volunteers to move the animals to safety.

At first the "animals smell and they get a little uncomfortable. But then they settle down and they're OK. Animals are very philosophical," she said.

The hurried departure cost \$100,000.

"There's never enough money. I beg, I borrow, I raise money, I put up some of my own money," said Colette.

Some of her animals have come from far away.

A tiger named Jodi was donated by an animal protection group in Ireland, and there are chimpanzees supplied by research institutes.

She said many [animals](#) come from regular people who think it is cool to adopt, say, a lion cub until it grows and starts destroying their home.

"Some people adopt a chimp because it looks like a baby. Until it grows," Colette said. And then they cannot cope with the creature.

"This business brings very strange people, very, very strange, actually very scary people," she said.

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