



Photos by JANET L. MATHEWS/The Columbian

**Close relationship:** Shirley Malar holds Cassandra, a 45-pound Siberian lynx at Wild Ones Sanctuary near Brush Prairie. Malar, who keeps 15 big cats on her one-acre homestead, is feeling the crunch of Clark County's growth as her once-rural setting is being surrounded by housing subdivisions.

# CAT WOMAN

**Urban sprawl, financial woes leave keeper of big cats pondering future**

*"This used to be the perfect spot for us, out in the country. But it's not the country anymore."*

Shirley Malar

By BRIAN WILLOUGHBY  
Columbian staff writer

The boundary between rural and urban continues to shift in fast-growing Clark County, as housing tracts replace farm land and traffic snarl tie up country roads.

But the snarl surrounding one wooded acre southeast of Brush Prairie has nothing to do with traffic. It has to do with cats. Big cats.

"This used to be the perfect spot for us, out in the country," said Shirley Malar. "But it's not the country anymore."

Malar, an unemployed secretary, has devoted her life — and her pocketbook — to rescuing lynx, bobcats and servals. She takes in captive-born big cats, buying them from fur farms who would kill them for their pelts and taking them from families who have outgrown the novelty of having a wild animal for a pet. She has 15 cats now, but has had as many as 21.

The cats range in age from 2 to 12, with lifespans up to about 16 years. They weigh from about 20 pounds to 75 pounds. They come to her one-acre



**Quiet time:** Chelsea, a 5-year-old Canadian lynx rescued from a fur farm, stares out from her house within a caged enclosure at Wild Ones Sanctuary, a nonprofit animal compound founded by Shirley Malar.

## WILD ONES SANCTUARY

■ **WHAT:** A nonprofit program to rescue captive-born big cats, including lynx, bobcats and servals. The cats are no longer bred; they live in large cages on a one-acre parcel southeast of Brush Prairie. The compound doesn't have lions, tigers or other large cats.

■ **WHO:** Shirley Malar, an unemployed secretary, who 12 years ago began rescuing large cats from fur farms and families who no longer relished the idea of a wildcat as a pet. Malar became interested in wildcats as a youth.

■ **COST:** Malar spends \$6,000 a year for food and \$2,000 or more each year for veterinary bills. Most of that is from her own pocket, with a few donations coming in to support the program.

■ **CONTACT:** Wild Ones Sanctuary, P.O. Box 1050, Brush Prairie, WA 98606; or 254-3118; [www.pacificor.com/~wildones](http://www.pacificor.com/~wildones).

# Cats

*Some neighbors complain about noise, safety*

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homestead to live out their lives, eating turkey drumsticks and raw chicken necks, climbing on play structures meant for human toddlers and learning to love Malar, their keeper and human companion.

Malar has lived there in a single-wide mobile home for 17 years, long before housing tracts started growing up around her. She began the cat compound 12 years ago. Malar's property is bordered to the north and west by other one-acre parcels, but suburban family homes follow her fence line to the east and south.

With a potential piece of property in rural north Clark County, Malar had hoped to move this past summer. But a job loss earlier in the year, combined with the cost of upkeep for the cats, has drained her finances. She still hopes to move but isn't sure when she would be able to afford it.

## Licensing

Wild-animal keepers in Clark County must be licensed by one of two agencies, either the U. S. Department of Agriculture or Clark County Animal Control and Protection. Each license requires an annual fee and includes annual inspections.

Malar is licensed by the USDA. A check with USDA records indicated that her license is current and she had one violation, a fencing problem in 1993 that was corrected. Animal Control responds to complaints about wild animals, whether the facility is licensed by USDA or the county. They, too, have visited Malar's compound, most recently in September.

"Mostly, it's been about fencing issues, but as far as we know — and we're not the licensing agency, remember — but as far as we know, she's aboveboard and operating within the regulations," said Tim Jennings, director of Animal Protection and Control.

Jennings estimates there are 12 wild-animal keepers in Clark County, with Malar's the largest facility for cats. Most permits, he said, are for people keeping one or two animals, rather than larger

compounds.

Problems with a wolf-hybrid compound in north Clark County escalated last week, when 16 of 40 wolf-dogs were killed. And a tiger-owning man who thought about moving to Battle Ground with his wild animal in 1998 chose to settle outside Clark County due to public uproar.

Malar's operation has operated quietly through all that, drawing attention only from her immediate neighbors.

Some neighbors don't seem to mind.

"I haven't even heard the cats, and the lady who keeps them seems very nice," said Michelle Timmermann, who moved into the neighborhood a month ago and shares a fence with Malar.

Other neighbors have lodged numerous complaints. The most vocal of Malar's opponents recently moved away from a neighboring property and could not be reached for comment.

There have been some complaints about noise — some of the cats can growl loudly — and some about safety.

Laura and Chuck Gehle, a retired couple, were among the first residents of the subdivision to the east of Malar's compound. They moved in about seven years ago. They don't share a fence with Malar, but they live within 100 yards of the compound.

"That's the thing you worry about: What if one of those cats got out? We have a lot of kids in this neighborhood," Laura Gehle said. "Why doesn't she live someplace with a little more room, someplace a little more in the country?"

Chuck Gehle answered that question: "She did. Once. Then all these houses came in."

And now Malar, who is in her 40s, believes it's time to think about moving out. But after depleting her savings, mortgaging her home and using all her income to feed and care for the cats, she isn't financially ready for such a move.

"I just don't see how I could swing it right now," she said.

Meantime, she loves the cats whose lives she has saved. None was born in the wild, she said, and none is suitable for release. One is blind. Another has recovered from a broken back.

Each day, Malar ventures into their cages to clean and feed them, and to offer affection to those who don't mind human contact.

"These guys are my best friends," she said. "When I come home, it's like they're saying, 'Yippe! Mom's here!' No matter how bad my day has been, I can't be depressed around these guys."



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**Boomerang bob:** Boomerang, a 5-year-old bobcat, nuzzles Shirley Malar's hair in his caged enclosure. The 20-pound bobcat suffered a broken back as a kitten, and Malar nursed him back to health.