The pride of San Andreas

On the grassy hills of Calaveras, four lions taste freedom for the first time

Lions rescued from a Bolivian Circus were introduced Friday to their new enclosures at the Ark2000 refuge near San Andreas. Personnel from Animal Defenders International and Jorja Fox, an actress and ADI ambassador, were on hand for the event. [Craig Sanders/The Record]

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SAN ANDREAS - Four lions freed from a Bolivian circus frolicked Friday amid clover and oak trees on a hillside at the Ark2000 refuge not far from San Andreas. It was the first time the three males and one female had ever walked on grass or seen the open sky except through the bars of a cage, said representatives of Animal Defenders International, the organization whose campaign prompted Bolivia to ban the use of animals in circus acts.

Newspaper photographers and television crews recorded the moment a few minutes after noon as "CSI" actress Jorja Fox pulled a metal handle to open a gate so the lions could walk out into several acres of woodland.

Nothing happened.

Initially, the lions ignored the open gate and continued to lounge on pine needles scattered across a cement-floored enclosure where they'd been since arriving about 3 a.m.

For several hours, that enclosure was more than enough for the animals, which had spent most of their lives in smaller cages.

"This morning, we let them out here, and they were bouncing all over," said Pat Derby, the Performing Animal Welfare Society executive director who oversees the Ark2000 refuge.

The cement-floored enclosures with several hundred feet of roaming space were more than large enough for the lions after a lifetime of being shuttled between the back of a truck and the performance ring of a circus, Derby said.

By noon - when news crews were on hand to watch the lions head outdoors - the four were tired. And apparently pleased to stay put.

Camba, the female, made the first move.
Some food lured her toward the open door. Still, she hesitated, went halfway out, then, at 12:19 p.m., finally found herself under nothing but blue sky and puffy white clouds.

For now, Camba is being kept in a separate enclosure and has a adjoining area of fenced woodland where she's free to roam. That's because Ark2000 managers don't want the lions to breed.

The three males ignored their own open gate and stared, apparently dumbstruck, as Camba took a leisurely stroll to the far end of her compound, stared at the cars parked on a road below, and then came looping back around past trees and grass, at one point sprinting uphill.

Finally, after 15 minutes, animal caretakers lured Bambek, one of the males, to his gate, and he, too, emerged. Daktari followed, and Simba, seeing all three of his peers outside, finally made his move.

Suddenly, Camba and Bambek were running uphill, side by side, with only the dividing fence between them.

But sprinting was the exception. For the most part, the lions' movements were slow, even arthritic.

Fox noted the awkward gait of the lions, whose ages range from about 6 to about 12.

"They don't have a lot of muscle, these cats," Derby said. "They'll have to build strength to enjoy the enclosure."

Although they are descended from African lions, the four former circus lions were born and raised in captivity.

Ed Stewart, co-director of the Performing Animal Welfare Society, said inbreeding also contributes to physical problems.

A fifth lion also freed from a Bolivian circus didn't make it. Maiza, a female, was euthanized two weeks ago because she was blind and, at 18, too old and frail to make the trip to the United States. She was the mother of three of the lions now living in San Andreas.

Bolivia is the first nation to ban the use of all animals in circus acts. The ban came in 2009 after undercover agents of Animal Defenders International infiltrated circuses and documented conditions with photographs and video.

Lions raised in captivity lack the hunting skills needed to return to full freedom, Derby said. All the lions at PAWS will be neutered to ensure they do not create a new generation doomed to captivity, she said.

Ark2000 is a 2,300-acre refuge that also is home to 33 tigers and nine elephants. Contact reporter Dana M. Nichols at (209) 607-1361 or dnichols@recordnet.com. Visit his blog at recordnet.com/calaverasblog.