

Lions, tigers and bears on the loose

While animal escapes make for quirky news headlines, they highlight a dark side to the breeding, selling, and treatment of exotic animals in the United States

By Ava Kowalski. Dec. 14, 2021.

Two zebras that escaped from a private farm in Maryland in August have finally been caught. Maryland and D.C. residents have embraced the escapees as symbols of resistance and ungovernable freedom, flooding social media with zebra memes, jokes, and cartoons. People even dressed up as the Maryland zebras for Halloween. Content about the loose animals was all in good fun until the [Washington Post](#) reported that one of the zebras was found dead in a snare trap on private property in September.

While the remaining zebras continued to roam in Maryland, another pair of zebras in Illinois [escaped](#) from an indoor zoo at a pumpkin patch in October. They frolicked along Interstate-90 for about two hours until police and zoo employees were able to safely track them down.

The phenomenon of animal escapes extends to other species as well. Last summer, a privately owned [tiger named India](#) roamed the streets of Houston for nearly a week before being captured and relocated to an animal sanctuary.

One of the country's most tragic exotic animal escapes occurred 10 years ago at the Muskingum County Animal Farm, a private zoo in Ohio, when Terry Thompson released his collection of wild animals before taking his own life. [Deputies killed](#) 18 Bengal tigers, 17 lions, six black bears, three cougars, two grizzly bears, two wolves and a baboon – resulting in a total of 49 dead animals. Prior to the massacre, Thompson had been charged with [animal cruelty](#) and faced complaints over previous animal escapes.

Why are we still seeing instances of exotic animals escaping, often with tragic results, a decade later? Chris Berry, Managing Attorney at the Animal Legal Defense Fund, says that lax laws are to blame. "It's disturbing that we can breed, sell, transfer wild animals with such ease in this country that they were in a position to escape in the first place," says Berry. Animal welfare advocates say that recurring instances of loose exotic animals emphasize a need for new or stronger laws around the trade, ownership, and treatment of wild animals.

Both public and private zoos pose a moral debate. Some animal rights advocates argue that keeping wild animals captive, regardless of the standards, is detrimental to their health and futile, while others argue that zoos play an important role in species conservation and education.

Just because a zoo is privately-owned doesn't mean it's inherently a "bad" zoo. Some of the country's most reputable zoos, like the nonprofit Phoenix Zoo, are privately-owned and accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, an independent organization that accredits zoos based on the association's standards of animal care.

In an interview with [CNN](#), A.Z.A. President and former Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Dan Ashe said that, despite the A.Z.A. being the primary accreditor in the U.S., fewer than 10% of animal exhibitors licensed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture are accredited.

This leaves room for cases of abuse, neglect, and even escape. For instance, [Jerry Holly](#), the owner of the Maryland zebras, had a U.S.D.A.- issued breeding license in Maryland and Florida.

[The U.S.D.A.](#) requires individuals who breed certain animals for commercial sale, use them in research, transport them commercially, or exhibit them to the public to be licensed, but the vetting process is minimal.

“You don't need special qualifications to have these animals,” says Berry. “Essentially, you just fill out some paperwork, and then they will inspect your facilities to make sure that it's not obviously noncompliant with the regulatory standards. Those are minimal as well. There's really no requirement for enrichment or having a large, adequate space to run around or anything like that.”

This licensing falls under the [Animal Welfare Act](#), the only Federal law in the U.S. that regulates the treatment of animals in research, exhibition, transport, and by dealers. (The law only applies to mammals, however.)

“The Federal Animal Welfare Act has very low standards. And even in the case of repeated instances of animal welfare violations, it's very rare to see anything beyond a warning or a cost-of-doing-business penalty,” says Berry. “With that dynamic, it's easy to cut corners ... and it's not surprising to see a situation where wild animals can escape from a poorly managed property.”

These lax laws make it easy for people to establish “roadside zoos.” [Born Free USA](#), an animal advocacy nonprofit, distinguishes roadside zoos – which it also calls “menageries” – from legitimate animal sanctuaries in that the former prioritizes profit and entertainment, breeds animals, and lacks vigorous oversight. Joe Exotic's Greater Wynnewood Exotic Animal Park, featured in the Netflix series “Tiger King,” is a famous example.

The family-owned nonprofit [Emerald Coast Zoo](#) is nestled in the Florida panhandle. Rick Deridder, known as “Rick the Reptile Guy,” bought the zoo, formerly a wildlife refuge of a different name, in 2016 when his daughter Suzy wanted a pet sloth. “We found a sloth, right here in Florida, but there was one catch: It came with a zoo. So we just bought the whole thing,” Deridder said in [this article](#).

In a phone interview with Deridder's son, who goes by Tarzan, bellows from nearby watusis – the African equivalent of a Longhorn Steer with horns as wide as pine tree – trunks periodically drown out his voice. Beeps and staticky exchanges between colleagues over Tarzan's walkie-talkie add to the intermittent cacophony. He apologizes for the background noise, explaining that he's building a new pond for the crocodiles as he talks. Earlier in the day, he had to wrangle some of the fennec foxes.

“I’ve grown up with animals my whole life. I have a picture from when I was, like, 5-years-old holding a Nile Crocodile,” Tarzan says. His favorite resident animal is the alligator. “He’s really nice. He’s a big, fat lovable alligator. We want to get to get him on a leash walk him around the zoo while people are here.”

Although walking a crocodile isn’t an option, the Emerald Coast Zoo advertises animal encounters, where guests can “pet a sloth,” “train a lion,” “love a bear,” “hop with a roo,” and more.

The Emerald Coast Zoo is licensed by the U.S.D.A. and undergoes inspections roughly every three months, usually conducted by the same person, Tarzan says. “Our U.S.D.A. inspector is really cool; he knows that we’re working on everything.”

Each animal has its own personality and behaviors, Tarzan says, which is how he determines if they’re happy at the zoo. The zoo’s wolves, for example, get up and play when kids run around the exhibit. “The wolves are always super happy,” Tarzan says. He admits that the monkeys can get “depressed” if they need more enrichment.

So where are people like Rick the Reptile Guy and Jerry Holly getting their animals?

In the Emerald Coast Zoo’s case, it rescues animals from inhumane conditions, buys or trades them from other zoos, and accepts exotic pets from unfit owners. A few animals, including a large tortoise, a couple of macaws, and a monkey, were family pets before Deridder started the zoo, Tarzan says.

The zoo also has ties to Bhagavan “Doc” Antle, a prominent animal trainer, conservationist, and private zoo operator featured in “Tiger King.” Antle was [indicted](#) on wildlife trafficking charges last year after an investigation claimed that he and another private zoo-owner trafficked lion cubs between South Carolina and Virginia.

“Doc Antle is actually a really good friend of ours. We’ve stayed at his house before, we’ve played with his elephant, we’ve hung out before. He’s pretty cool,” Tarzan says. “We’ve got our black Jaguar from him. Two of our big white tigers are from him. He’s going to give us a hyena in a while.”

Tarzan says that, if you know where to look, exotic animal breeders aren’t hard to find. A simple Google search reveals sites selling everything from sloths to wolf pups and wallabies. People also obtain animals by capturing them from the wild and trafficking them.

In Jerry Holly’s case, [investigations reveal](#) that he ran an exotic animal-breeding business and, in addition to his zebras, owned large cats, primates, giraffes, bears, and more. Certificates of veterinary inspection show that Holly sold animals, including monkeys, camels, and lemurs, to small zoos in North Carolina. He also sold four young zebras to a livestock auction in Tennessee in 2018.

The DCist also reports that Holly had been cited for more than 100 violations of the Animal Welfare Act and that Florida's wildlife agency sought to revoke his state-issued license.

“In most states, it's very easy to be in the business of breeding, dealing, or even just privately possessing wild animals,” says Berry. “While there are states that prohibit private ownership of wild animals, many states allow you to do it with really just cursory paperwork requirements, like registering with the state agency and maybe sending out a form every year.”

There is no federal law that mandates what kinds of animals can be owned. Instead, it is left up to state and local jurisdictions. In [Harris County](#), Texas, for example, you can keep “a dangerous wild animal,” such as a tiger, as long as you apply to register it.

**APPLICATION FOR
CERTIFICATE OF REGISTRATION FOR DANGEROUS WILD ANIMALS**

I. INSTRUCTIONS:			
A.	Prior to filing this Application the Applicant must read and familiarize himself with the following: • Subchapter E, Chapter 822, Texas Health & Safety Code. • The Caging Requirements and Standards for the Keeping and Confinement of Dangerous Wild Animals established by the Texas Board of Health. • The federal Animal Welfare Act Regulations relating to facilities and operations; animal health and husbandry; and veterinary care for each of the animal species listed in this Application.		
B.	This Application must be filed with _____ [Name of Animal Registration Agency]		
C.	A registration fee of \$50 per animal up to a total of \$500 per Applicant must be paid at the time this Application is filed. Payment must be made in cash, cashier's check or money order payable to the order of _____ [Name of Animal Registration Agency]		
D.	All blanks in this Application must be completed. Please type or print legibly.		
E.	All required submission items listed in Section V below must be complete and legible and must accompany the filing of this Application.		
II. APPLICANT INFORMATION:			
Applicant's Name: _____		Mailing Address: _____	
Street Address: _____		(if different) _____	
Tel: _____		Emergency Tel: _____	
Fax: _____		Email Address: _____	
If Applicant is other than an individual, please provide the following information:			
Check One: ☐ Partnership ☐ Corporation ☐ Trust ☐ Other (explain) _____			
Designated contact person for above checked organization: Name: _____			
Address: _____			
Tel: _____ city _____ state _____ Fax: _____ zip _____			
Does the Applicant have a Dealer's or Exhibitor's License issued by the USDA under the federal Animal Welfare Act? ☐ Yes ☐ No			
If yes, check class of license held and provide license number: ☐ Class A ☐ Class B ☐ Class C License No.: _____			
Is this application for an original or renewal certificate of registration? ☐ Original ☐ Renewal			
Has the Applicant ever had any application for a certificate of registration or renewal denied? ☐ Yes ☐ No			
If yes, give dates and circumstances: _____			
Has the Applicant ever had a certificate of registration or renewal revoked? ☐ Yes ☐ No			
If yes, give date and circumstances: _____			
III. IDENTIFICATION OF ANIMAL(S):			
Species (common name)	Sex	Age	Color, Distinguishing Marks, and Other Identifying Features (e.g. ear notch, tattoo, sterilization, etc.)
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
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(Attach additional sheet if required)			

“The big picture of law is overly tolerant of animal exploitation for trivial human interests,” says Berry. He adds that the legal landscape needs to change in order to prevent more cases of animal neglect and escapes from occurring. “This is all collateral damage from a system that views using animals as lightly-regulated commodities”

Back at the Emerald Coast Zoo, Tarzan points to all of the injured or sick animals that the zoo has rehabilitated, such as an owl that recovered from a broken wing. “All of our animals are happy, even though they're not smiling all the time ... Just because the lion's not smiling doesn't mean they're not happy,” Tarzan says. “We take care of these animals because this is our career. We're not in it for the money. We're in it because we love these animals.” No animals have escaped from the Emerald Coast Zoo.

Berry says that more state and local jurisdictions need to prohibit private ownership of wild animals. The Animal Legal Defense Fund is one of the leaders in fighting-for stronger laws and better enforcement of existing laws. Its lawsuits have resulted in owners of [over a dozen](#) roadside zoos being ordered to move their animals or choosing to do so voluntarily

Thanks to media attention from shows like “Tiger King,” support for laws to protect exotic animals has grown. The Big Cat Public Safety Act was reintroduced in the U.S. Senate last April and could help end the private ownership of big cats. No political action has been taken since, but perhaps the recent second season of “Tiger King,” or the tragic case of the Maryland zebras will incite more public awareness of the private ownership of wild animals and spur more action to regulate it.

Jerry Holly's zebras have finally been captured, but who knows if more exotic escapees have taken to the backroads of America. Maybe another loose tiger in Texas will be on the news this week.