

SILVER CITY SUN-NEWS

Officials forced to kill trapped bobcat

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A young adult bobcat, which was discovered by residents on Johnson Road in a leg-hold trap Tuesday, had to be killed by officers with the Game and Fish Department due to the extent of its injuries.

"We ended up having to put that one down," said Jon Armijo, one of three Game and Fish officers to investigate the case. "We took it to Dennis Miller, but its foot was almost completely cut off. It's unfortunate."

Miller is a biology professor at Western New Mexico University who has operated the Gila Wildlife Rescue rehabilitation center with his wife, Denise, for the past 25 years. The facility is one of only two in the state licensed to handle all wildlife species.

Miller said Wednesday that homeowner Wade Holliday had notified him that the animal was caught in a trap on the four-acre residential property where he lives. Holliday also notified Game and Fish and other agencies.

"We work with Game and Fish, so I called them before I went out and they said they'd need to investigate," Miller said. "I went out and looked at the bobcat, but there was nothing I could do until they came out."

Although the incident was reported in the morning, Game and Fish officials were unable to reach the home until late afternoon. One local officer was on vacation, while Armijo and his supervisor from Las Cruces were conducting an aerial surveillance operation.

The agency eventually dispatched an officer from Deming and Armijo and his supervisor joined the case when they landed their aircraft.

"We have a good working relationship with them," said Miller. "They did the right thing to have us help them determine whether the animal could have been rehabilitated."

Unfortunately for the spotted cat, Miller determined the severity of the injury would not allow the animal to be rehabilitated and returned to the wild.

"At first, I thought it had just been grabbed by the toes, but when they brought it in, the whole foot had been caught," Miller said. "It was a much larger trap than I thought in the first place. The paw was pretty close to severed and the bone was broken. The animal would not have survived and I gave them my assessment the animal should be put down."

Miller explained that unlike a canine predator, such as a wolf, big cats not only need their front paws for chasing prey, but for capturing prey.

"A cat is a much different animal," Miller said. "The paw is a tool to kill with, and they need to be able to sprint quickly to catch their prey. In the wild, it probably would have died a slow starvation death."

Armijo said the trap was not legal and he is still investigating the case. Misdemeanor penalties for illegal trapping include fines ranging from \$50 to \$500 per offense. Although it is legal for people with a fur-bearer's license and a trapping license to trap for bobcat from Oct. 15 to March 15, the trap in question did not contain the proper tags.

"It didn't have any ID on it, it was an illegal trap," Armijo said. "We looked all over the place, but (the animal) could have come in from anywhere. And there's no telling how long that poor guy had been there."

Armijo speculated that the bobcat may have been walking down the paved street, dragging the trap, and was spooked by a car. It could have darted for Holliday's driveway, where the anchor of the trap snagged on a chain in the yard. After becoming entangled in the chain, neighbors reported the bobcat screaming.

Armijo said there is little to go on, but he will check with neighbors to see if there are any leads as to where the animal came from -- which could help determine where more traps might be.

Jon Schwedler of Animal Protection of New Mexico was disappointed Wednesday when learning of the animal's fate.

"Unfortunately, that's what a lot of animals are facing," he said. "It's too bad that what's happening here is also happening on public lands. This time, we could see it because it was in somebody's back yard."

Michael Robinson, carnivore conservation coordinator for the Center for Biological Diversity in Pinos Altos and the author of a newly released book chronicling the history of wolves in the West, was saddened Wednesday by the news of the cat's demise.

"That points to some larger issues," he said. "It's a very poorly regulated activity and they don't keep track of non-target animal deaths. Unlike a rifle hunter, who knows what he's shooting at, a trapper doesn't know what's going to step in the trap."

Robinson fears the bobcat population could be widely impacted by trapping.

"Nobody knows how much unlicensed trapping is going on, and unless instances like this come to public light, nobody knows how many animals are being wasted this way," he added. "This is just the tip of the iceberg, and we don't know how big the iceberg is."