

# The Columbus Dispatch

Sheriff: 56 exotic animals escaped from farm near Zanesville; 49 killed by authorities

Animal farm owner released the animals, then killed himself



APA dead lion lies by the fence on Terry Thompson's farm near Zanesville. Police killed dozens of animals yesterday that escaped from the wild-animal preserve where the owner's body later was found. Warning that more animals still were on the loose, officials expected up to four school districts to cancel classes as the remaining bears, big cats and other beasts from the Muskingum County Animal Farm were hunted down.

## THE HOT ISSUE

Was the Muskingum County sheriff's response to escaped wild animals appropriate?

**By Josh Jarman, and Quan Truong, and Jim Woods and Brenda Jackson**

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ZANESVILLE, Ohio —Authorities say that in all, 56 exotic animals escaped from a farm in Muskingum County last night, and one could still be missing this afternoon.

Of those animals, 49 were killed. Six animals -- a grizzly bear, three leopards and two monkeys-- were captured alive and taken to the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium, and a monkey and a grey wolf were at large. The animals that were killed included 18 tigers, nine male lions, eight female lions, six black bears, three mountain lions, two grizzly bears, one baboon and two wolves, Sheriff Matt Lutz said. The escaped monkey poses a danger because it is infected with herpes, the sheriff said.

The sheriff said it is possible that the missing monkey was eaten by a large cat.

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The owner of the farm, Terry Thompson, was found dead last night on his property. Authorities say Thompson opened the cage doors and cut the wires on the cages, then killed himself. He died from a gunshot wound. Lutz said Thompson's body was "bothered" by the animals.

Lutz had previously said a grizzly bear, a wolf and a mountain lion were missing. Today, authorities confirmed they killed the bear on the property last night. The wolf was later found dead; it had been shot last night. An officer wounded the mountain lion, which staggered into a neighbor's property and died.

Thompson's wife has returned to the farm and is talking to authorities. Jack Hanna, director emeritus of the Columbus Zoo, said the wife begged authorities not to take her "babies," but he convinced her to let the animals go and work it out later.

"I held her, I felt her shock. Her animals are gone. Her family is gone. Everything in her life is gone," Hanna said.

The animals that were killed by authorities likely will be buried on Thompson's property.

Lutz defended the shooting of the escaped animals. He said when deputies arrived at the house, there were large animals trying to escape. The deputies had to shoot them with their sidearms.

"Public safety was my No. 1 concern," Lutz said. "I gave the order that if the animals looked like they were going to get out, they were going down."

Hanna called this morning for the state to enact regulations to crack down on the possession, breeding and selling of exotic animals.

"I went to school at Muskingum (College)," he said. "It's like Noah's ark wrecked."

Hanna said he has talked to the governor's office about enacting stricter exotic animal laws.

"We need to set an example in the state of Ohio," he said. "There was a loss of life here, and we thank God it was not human life. It was animal life, and that's my life."

Hanna also defended the deputies shooting the animals.

The deputies were assisted by the State Highway Patrol, authorities from the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium and the Wilds, the state Division of Wildlife, the county Emergency Management Agency and township fire departments.

A plan to bring in a patrol helicopter with a thermal-imaging camera to find animals last night was scuttled last night by stormy weather.

Zanesville, West Muskingum and Maysville school districts, as well as Muskingum County Starlight School, all canceled classes for Wednesday to keep children inside. Lutz also recommends that residents remain inside today and call 911 if any wild animal is seen. Lutz said the incident began

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about 5:30 p.m., when the sheriff's office began receiving calls that wild animals were running loose in the area of Kopchak Road, which is in Falls Township and just west of Zanesville.

Lutz said that four deputies with assault rifles in a pickup truck immediately went to 270 Kopchak Rd., where a 46-acre "wild-animal-rescue farm" owned by Thompson borders I-70.

There, Lutz said, they found Thompson dead outside his house and "every single animal-cage door open." Lutz said the deputies saw a number of animals standing outside their cages, still on the property, while others had escaped a fence that surrounds Thompson's property. Deputies immediately began shooting animals, he said.

Lutz said the fence on Thompson's property isn't designed to keep in wild animals.

Lutz said a man who is a caretaker on the animal preserve told deputies that 48 animals lived in cages outside the house on the property. More animals — mostly monkeys, baboons and apes — lived inside Thompson's house, the man said.

Those inside the house were still in the cages, Lutz said.

Late last night, there was a report of a wolf and a bear still roaming at least 4 miles from the farm property. One animal was struck by a car and later killed.

The Licking County Sheriff's Office also received at least four phone calls from residents reporting exotic-animal sightings. SWAT officers with night-vision equipment were searching for animals in Licking County early this morning.

Lutz said Muskingum County deputies had fatally shot and killed at least 25 animals when they first drove to the property. A wolf and bear also reportedly were killed along I-70.

He said that officials from the Columbus Zoo and The Wilds came in shortly after the discovery with tranquilizer guns, hoping to capture some animals alive.

Thompson, 62, was released from federal prison just three weeks ago, after serving a one-year term.

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives had raided Thompson's Kopchak Road property in June 2008, seizing more than 100 guns. In April 2010, Thompson pleaded guilty in U.S. District Court in Columbus to two federal charges: possession of a machine gun and possession of short firearms without serial numbers.

Under terms of his release, Thompson was confined to his home for a year.

Thompson also was convicted in Muskingum County Municipal Court in 2005 of cruelty to animals, having an animal at large and two counts of rendering animal waste without a license. The charges stemmed from allegations that three cows and a bison had died on another property he owned, on Boggs Road in Perry Township, east of Zanesville.

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Neighbors there had lodged numerous complaints about him letting his animals wander. Thompson was put on house arrest for six months and paid a \$2,870 fine in that case. He also was ordered to move his animals to his Kopchak Road land.

Ohio has no rules regulating the sale and ownership of exotic animals.

Former Gov. Ted Strickland had attempted to enforce such a law, but Gov. John Kasich allowed an executive order to expire.

“There really needs to be some legislation changed on how these things are going on in the state of Ohio,” Lutz said.

Kate Riley, 20, who lives in western Muskingum County, said that Thompson has had lions, tigers and a bear get loose in the past.

Riley’s family owns a feed cattle farm nearby and said that Thompson would come and take their dead cows to feed his lions.

“He’d have claw marks all over him,” she said.

Riley said she understands that Thompson’s wife, Marian, recently left her husband and moved out.

Patti Peters, a spokeswoman for the Columbus Zoo, said staff members were at a dinner last night for the International Rhino Foundation when they heard about the incident. Five staff members from the zoo and the Wilds immediately went to help, she said.

Larry Hostetler, executive director of the Animal Shelter Society of Muskingum County, said the sheriff’s office and state officials had visited the Kopchak Road property in 2008 on a complaint that animals weren’t being taken care of there. The inspection, however, found acceptable treatment, Hostetler said.

Adelbert G. Kempf Jr, a retired veterinarian in Heath, said he inspected Thompson’s horses that day. He said that Thompson told him that he was running a rescue operation for horses.

“ He was far from that,” Hostetler said. “He was more of an animal collector.”

At one point, Thompson took three lion cubs to New York City for a photo shoot with model Heidi Klum. On another occasion, he brought animals to a 2007 community pet fair in Muskingum County. Thompson and his wife brought bear cubs, lions cubs and a baby ape, Hostetler said.

He said the wild animals disrupted the fair because they weren’t friendly.

“We had to change the advertisement in following years to say bring your domestic pets,” Hostetler said. “He was a piece of work.”

Dispatch staff reporter Kathy Lynn Gray contributed to this story.