

Big cat owner confirms death of lion cub born in HH

By Nate Smelle

Last week, big cat owner Mark Drysdale contacted Bancroft This Week to address rumours regarding the health of the three lion cubs recently born in Hastings Highlands.

According to Drysdale, one of the three cubs born at his property on Peterson Road three weeks ago died shortly after its birth, because he was allegedly "not viable." Despite sitting with the mother lioness, "Gabby" for 12 hours that afternoon trying to get the cubs to latch, he said every time they did start latching she would get up and knock them off. Denying allegations being made online that he removed the cubs from their mother shortly after their birth, Drysdale said, "It costs me over \$60 a day to feed these guys, so no I did not pull them for pictures. In fact, we don't charge for pictures nor do we allow pictures with the public. The pictures you have seen are all volunteers."

Noting that the two surviving cubs are doing well, Drysdale said he plans to put them back in the cage with their mother as soon as they are able to feed on their own. Although he admitted in a Facebook post the day after the cubs were born that he needed help; and, that he had never done bottle feeding, Drysdale maintained that he knows what he is doing; and, that none of the cubs had starved.

"Yes, we know how to feed cubs," said Drysdale. "Yes, we can afford to look after our animals. We were dealing with a family emergency and needed a little extra help. And it's not unusual for a couple of cubs to not make it in a litter; as with puppies kittens rabbits, etc."

Acknowledging how Hastings Highlands council is preparing to review the first draft of its Exotic Animal Bylaw at their meeting to be held on June 16, Drysdale said they are also prepared to deal with the municipality.

"We have all the recordings we need of the [former] mayor asking us not to buy the Bancroft property, and to come to Maynooth," he said. "Included in those recordings is him also telling us what zoning we should buy, as told to him by the planning department. So again, we did things right."

Recognizing that several big cats in professional zoos have contracted COVID-19, Zoocheck's campaigns director Julie Woodyer indicated that the Drysdales are putting the cubs in danger by allowing people without masks or PPE - whether they are "volunteers" or not - cuddle and take photos with them. In the absence of a necropsy, she said they can only speculate why one of the cubs died.

Acknowledging that most professional zoos perform a necropsy to determine why an animal died, Woodyer said she suspects dehydration, because "not feeding for a full day is very dangerous and Drysdale took that long to try to find someone who knew what they were doing to feed the cubs after he snatched them from their mother."

While she believes she Drysdale's actions contributed to the cub's death, Woodyer said without a necropsy the cause of death will remain unknown. The reason professionally operated zoos always have necropsies done, she said is so they can learn from their mistakes, and, also to ensure there is nothing going on that may impact the other cubs.