

Local artist works on the wild side

Welcome to repARTee, a column encompassing the arts and entertainment in Punta Gorda.

This is the seventh of a series of columns about things to do in and around Punta Gorda.

Before my husband and I moved to Punta Gorda, we'd heard about a wildlife sanctuary that made its home in rural Punta Gorda. But as usual, our daily routines became such that we never got around to visiting Octagon Wildlife Sanctuary, which is a short distance on State Route 31 from Babcock Wildlife Adventure Tours.

When I learned that local artist Michael Vires was creating a mural for the sanctuary, I drove there to check on his progress. Octagon is located in the far southern portion of Punta Gorda, not far from the Charlotte-Lee County line and only a few miles south of another of Punta Gorda's must-see destinations, Babcock Wilderness Adventure Tours.

Vires' is well-known in Punta Gorda as a formidable artist, muralist and a gifted instructor. Residents and visitors can see his original work on the Rooney Building located at Olympia Avenue and Wood Street entitled "Cattle Drive on Marion Avenue." He also recreated two murals destroyed by Hurricane Charley, "Natural Beauty" on the FPL substation and "Movie Memories" at the Charlotte Harbor Event & Conference Center. All three murals are close to downtown.

Octagon Wildlife Sanctuary is a little farther away – about 30 miles, actually. I asked Vires how he became involved in this particular project, and he said, "Roger and Jane Dickinson and Sandy O'Grady are hard-working volunteers at Octagon, and they introduced me to the sanctuary a couple of months ago.

"They asked my opinion about what could be done to an old billboard painting on the premises. I have always felt closeness with animals. When Sandy, Roger and Jane told me what a rescuing angel Lauri Caron has been for the animals at Octagon, the muralist in me kicked in. So I told Lauri 'We'll donate a new mural to Octagon.'

"The mural is 8 feet high and 16 feet wide. It will be the first thing visitors see when they come through the gate. I want this mural to be the animals welcoming you to their habitat - the home they are so happy to have been blessed with.

"I sincerely hope this mural encourages the community to come and enjoy these beautiful animals. It is hot, sweaty work but it's also a small thing compared to the long hours the volunteers give each week and Lauri Caron's love and devotion over the years to these magnificent animals."

After watching Vires work on the mural, I took a tour of the grounds with Caron, Octagon's director. If you love animals, you'll see small reptiles, donkeys, primates, huge tigers and everything in between. More than 20 tigers, as well as other big cats, including leopards, lions and a liger (a cross between a lion and a tiger), live at Octagon.

The animals appear content and happy — and some of them look downright cuddly. But Caron warned, "People think that if an animal is born in captivity, or is in an enclosure, it must mean that it will be like a domestic lap cat. In most situations this is not the case, and it is the reason we have so many of these beautiful creatures residing at Octagon."

Octagon's mission is to "provide a healthy recovery and living environment for abandoned and abused exotic wildlife." Operating as a nonprofit, and depending on the efforts of its dedicated volunteers, the sanctuary is home to more than 200 exotic animals.

According to Caron, the big cats, bears and other exotic animals came from circuses, zoos and animal acts, as well as confiscations by law enforcement. Some of the animals were beaten and abused, their teeth or claws removed or they were physically altered in some way. Octagon cares for these animals, saving many from needless euthanization.

Octagon Wildlife Sanctuary is located at 41660 Horseshoe Road in Punta Gorda. The facility welcomes visitors from 11 a.m. until 4 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays, and no appointment is necessary; however, personalized tours or weekday visits must be arranged in advance by calling 239-543-1130. Admission fees of \$10 for adults; \$5 for seniors 55 and older and tweens

ages 8 to 17. Kids age 7 and under are free with a paying adult.

To learn more about Octagon, make a financial or in kind donation or to volunteer, visit their Web site at www.octagonwildlife.org.

When you visit, be sure you check out the mural by Vires — it's going to be something special.

Until next week, remember, the arts and entertainment are good for the soul; indulge yourself.

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This small sketch for the mural he is creating for Octagon Wildlife Sanctuary provides artist Michael Vires with a guide for the finished mural.



HERALD PHOTOS BY RUTH SPIES Lauri Caron, director of Octagon Wildlife Sanctuary points to a spot on the lion that needs a bit more paint, while artist Michael Vires obliges. Vires volunteered his services to paint a mural on the billboard at the entrance to the sanctuary.



A black, or melanistic, leopard named Lilly strolls around her enclosure. Leopards are considered to be smaller than the “big cats” — tigers, lions.



Zulu the lion was rescued by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and taken to Octagon. His owners tried to stunt his growth by keeping him in a small cage.



Baloo, a Himalayan sun bear, is 30 years old. Confiscated from a circus, Baloo is just one of many exotic animals living out their lives at Octagon Wildlife Sanctuary in rural Punta Gorda.