

Wallaroo escapes, goes on Alva rampage

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John Nolen first tried to scare the wallaroo that was charging him Wednesday by throwing a pair of heavy pliers at the hopping mammal.

But that didn't faze the 85-pound male wallaroo — slightly smaller than its kangaroo cousin — which had already attacked a neighbor who tried to put it back in its cage at a ranch in east Lee County near Alva.

"He just kept coming," Nolen said.

Even an earlier hammer blow to the jaw did not slow the aggressive animal that wildlife officials said was protecting its female companions in heat.

Without time to duck back in the truck and his safety no longer certain, Nolen, 44, reached for his 9 mm pistol.

"I shot once at the ground and a second time that hit him in the shoulder," Nolen said.

The injured wallaroo finally hopped away to another part of the ranch and stopped near a wood pile. Lauri Caron, owner of nearby Octagon Wildlife Animal Sanctuary, tranquilized the animal and took it to the Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife (CROW) on Sanibel for treatment.

Veterinarian PJ Deitschel began surgery on the wallaroo, but the animal's injuries to its abdomen and shoulder area were too extensive to repair, said CROW spokeswoman Birgie Vertesch.

Deitschel obtained permission from the animal's owner, Dr. Kenneth Berdick, to euthanize it, Vertesch said. The Australian mammal died Wednesday afternoon.

A Fort Myers physician, Berdick — who does not live at the compound at 16031 N. River Road — has a state permit to keep wallaroos. Berdick did not return phone messages seeking comment.

State wildlife officials are investigating the incident.

"This animal could look you eye to eye," said wildlife officer Lenny Barshinger. "They're very powerful animals for their size. They have formidable claws on their hands."

The confrontation began shortly after 8 a.m. Wednesday when Berdick's neighbors, Steve and Susan Rogerson, saw the wallaroo out of its outdoor cage.

The animal had escaped from a small hole in the cage and was on the Rogersons' property when Susan Rogerson first came outside to tend to her farm animals.

She and her husband got in their golf cart and tried to coax the wallaroo back to its cage, where the two females and another male remained.

"He started nudging the golf cart. He jumped on the side of it," said Susan Rogerson, 39.

At that point, Steve Rogerson, 46, got out of the golf cart and was forced to trade punches with the creature in an effort to defend himself and subdue the animal.

The wallaroo suffered a cut lip in that struggle.

Surprised and scared by the animal's persistence, Susan Rogerson ran back and alerted house guest Scott Menard, 56, who witnessed the majority of the attack. He saw the animal pounce and knock his friend to the ground.

"The roo jumped right on top of him and held him down," Menard said. "Steve grabbed his arm."

Menard said he grabbed a stick and started whacking the animal on the head, but the wallaroo didn't budge from atop Steve Rogerson. So, Menard grabbed a hammer that was inside the cart.

"I hit him in the jaw with a hammer," he said. "I heard a bone crack."

After the hammer blow, the wallaroo got off Rogerson and hopped away. A short time later, Nolen encountered the animal about 60 yards away and shot it when it would not retreat. Menard agreed that Nolen's shots were in self-defense.

Meanwhile, Susan Rogerson called 911. Her husband suffered bruises and scratches during the attack. He was taken by ambulance to Lee Memorial Hospital, where he was treated and released. Tests to check for internal injuries were negative, Susan Rogerson said. She said her husband received a few sutures to his right ear and pain medication.

Steve Rogerson declined an interview request.

"He's just sore like if you were just in a car accident," Susan Rogerson said. "He said he felt the (wallaroo) held back" because it knew him.

Neighbors Nolen and the Rogersons help care for Berdick's wallaroos — a male and two females are still at the ranch — and other animals. Berdick also has llamas and goats on the property. Susan Rogerson, Nolen and wildlife officials all said the animals were in mating season.

Rogerson said she does not fault the wallaroo for acting on its instincts.

"We feel really bad," Susan Rogerson said. "It was just a freak accident."

Caron said the animal may have been protecting the females because of mating season or the animal could just have been scared or nervous.