

WILDFIRE RESCUES



Brave people face dangerous blazes to save helpless animals.

BY JAMIE KIFFEL-ALCHEH

Too weak to run, a starving bobcat limps through smoky woods. He's just one of thousands of animals trying to survive the aftermath of nearly 8,000 wildfires that tore through California in the summer and fall of 2018.

The most destructive wildfire season in the state's history, the blazes destroyed 1.9 million acres of land, or an area bigger than the state of Delaware. The fires also cut off power and damaged or destroyed nearly 25,000 structures across hundreds of towns. Hot, dry weather combined with high winds caused many of the wildfires (careless humans also caused a few of them), forcing hundreds of thousands of people to abandon their homes to seek shelter. Some people needed rescuing ... and so did some animals.

Luckily brave humans across the state pitched in to help neighbors and animals alike. Read on for five heroic stories of animal rescues.



Bobcats
are named for
their short,
bobbed tails.

BOBCAT RESCUE

Although bobcats are rarely seen, they're the most common wild cat in North America.

An injured bobcat searches for prey among blackened tree stumps but finds nothing to eat. It's been three weeks since the massive Camp Fire destroyed the cat's habitat in northern California. The underweight juvenile won't survive much longer without food.

Luckily a passerby spots the cat and calls Sallysue Stein, the founder of Gold Country Wildlife Rescue. Stein arranges to have the cat brought to her facility. "When he arrived, we could see that his paws were singed and he was obviously hungry," Stein says. "When we were able to examine him, we saw that the pads of his paws had been burned all the way to the bone." Plus, the cat weighed just eight pounds, about five pounds less than the weight of a healthy juvenile bobcat.

Still, the cat swats at the staff as they try to treat him. "He had a lot of fight left," Stein says. "He wasn't giving up, and neither were we."

HI-TECH TREATMENT

Medicine helps make the cat more comfortable, but his paws need much more care. The cat's rescuers call in veterinarian Jamie Peyton, who specializes in animal burns.

First, Peyton gives the bobcat cold laser therapy, which exposes the cat's paws to a special light that reduces bacteria on his skin. Then she suggests a new type of treatment to heal the animal's wounds: fish skin. By wrapping both of the cat's paws in bandages from tilapia (a type of fish) skin, they can protect his paws from getting infected; plus, the collagen—a kind of protein—found in the tilapia might help the wounds heal



VETERINARIANS APPLY SKIN FROM TILAPIA (A TYPE OF FISH) TO THE BOBCAT'S PAWS TO KEEP THEM FROM GETTING INFECTED.

faster. The bobcat even gets acupuncture, a traditional form of Chinese medicine in which tiny needles are placed into the skin to relieve pain.

After a week of treatments, the bobcat's appetite increases, and he switches from just gruel to having birds and mice added to his meals. "We knew he was ready to be released when he started trying to escape from his kennel," Stein says.

GOING HOME

After 11 weeks of treatment, the bobcat is taken to Big Chico Creek Ecological Reserve, which hasn't been impacted by the fires and is

full of prey for the cat. The cage door is opened. The bobcat steps out and surveys his surroundings. Then he sprints up a tall tree and disappears from view.

"Our goal was to give the bobcat a second chance in the wild," Stein says. "It's where he belongs."

THE BOBCAT CHECKS OUT HIS NEW HOME IN BIG CHICO CREEK ECOLOGICAL RESERVE.



NEARLY FOUR MONTHS AFTER BEING INJURED IN A FIRE, THE HEALED BOBCAT IS ABLE TO CLIMB TREES AGAIN.