



Sam Roberts / Times-News

A seven-year-old male lion named Thomas was checked out by doctors from UNC School of Medicine and Alamance Ear, Nose, Throat & Facial Plastic Surgery on Wednesday at The Conservators' Center in Caswell County. It was determined that Thomas had a middle ear infection and would be prescribed antibiotics to treat the infection.

NO ROAR TROUBLE

Big cat on the road to recovery after Wednesday afternoon treatment

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PLEASANT GROVE — What happens when the king of beasts has an earache?

If you're Thomas Lion — one of the favorite big cats at the Conservator's Center — four veterinarians, three ear, nose and throat surgeons and about a dozen more medical interns and handlers will make a house call.

That was the scene Wednesday, huddled around a heavily sedated Thomas inside the wildlife rescue and preservation center just over the Caswell County line. Dr. J. Madison Clark, of Alamance Ear, Nose

About the center

For more information on the Conservator's Center, its mission, how to sponsor and animals there and how to schedule a visit, call 336-421-0883 or go online at www.conservatorscenter.org.

Scheduled appointments are required to visit the center.

and Throat, and the other doctors normally practice on humans. But they didn't seem phased by their toothsome, 550-pound patient.

Face-to-face with Thomas, Clark efficiently ran scopes into the lion's ears and nose, checking for signs of

serious infections and damage.

The Conservator's Center houses rescued exotic animals, including 21 lions, 10 tigers, two leopards and a host of other wild animals including wolves and New Guinea singing dogs. It boasts the largest collection of big cats in the Southeast.

Mindy Stinner and Douglas Evans, the center's co-founders, noticed the 7-year-old lion scratching his left ear late last summer. Thomas was his usual charming self during public tours, showing off for school and scouting groups making their way through the refuge's towering maze of pens, but then he'd pause to shake his head and scratch at his

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worrisome ear.

The scratching got so bad they called in a vet in January, finding several types of bacteria inside the lion's ear. Oral doses of antibiotics and a round of medicated ear drops followed. But the infection returned.

In July, Stinner called on Clark, an ENT doctor who specializes in facial reconstruction surgery and practices in Burlington.

Clark and Stinner have a history. In 2004, the Conservator's Center rescued a Bengal tiger cub with a cleft palate. Clark had traveled around the world, repairing cleft palates for children in third-world countries. A veterinarian referred Stinner to Clark, familiar with his work. A video of Clark's surgery on the cub is now shown to veterinary students at the University of California, Davis.

Speaking Tuesday evening before his trip to the lion's den, Clark wasn't concerned for his safety; rather that he'd be able to diagnose and treat Thomas. He called in Dr. Harold C. Pillsbury, chair of UNC School of Medicine's otolaryngology and head and neck surgery department, for assistance.

"I have this algorithm all laid out. Whenever I do surgery, I like to rehearse the

procedure several times in my head before I perform it," Clark said Tuesday night. "Having said that, I've never looked in a lion's ear before. I've told (Stinner), I'll do the best I can. I have no expectations as far as what we'll find."

THOMAS WAS BORN at the Conservator's Center in 2004, after 14 lions and tigers were rescued from abhorrent conditions at an Ohio residence.

"This is like putting a child in surgery," Stinner said nervously before the procedure began.

Stinner and Evans hand-raised the cubs and developed deep bonds with them. They are able to get closer to the lions than what would normally be safe. But they are careful not to publish photos or videos of them petting the lions and tigers, for fear that others will think the Conservator's Center is a petting zoo.

They founded the center in 1999, with the intention of taking smaller exotic cats and dogs that were neglected or unwanted. They also wanted to selectively breed endangered species. But the 2004 emergency rescue quickly changed that mission. Thomas was one of 15 cubs born within weeks of the lions and tigers being brought to North Carolina.

"What's so rewarding is to take animals from these horrific conditions and bring them here and see that they are well-fed, they have a nice place to live and are happy," Evans said. "Almost all of these animals have a traumatic story in their background."

Housed separately in small prides, the lions at the center communicate by emitting a loud, low growl called "oof-ing." The sound works as a check-in, Evans explained during a short tour of the center Wednesday, like the cats saying, "I'm here. I'm fine. How are you?"

When all 21 make the sound, it reverberates the air, like standing near a passing train.

After adolescence, Thomas became an ambassador for the center. He put on small shows for guests, walking to the edge of his pen and oofing to greet them.

"He's so great with children," Stinner said. "He calls to them and they call back, and he'll call to them again, even louder. So the kids have to 'oof' at the top of their lungs."

Thomas fought anesthesia. It took Stinner, Evans and Dr. Gregg Jordan, of the Animal Hospital of Mebane, nearly two hours to put him under with numerous tranquilizers and sedatives. They rolled the slumbering giant onto a blanket and lifted him onto a gurney. More sedatives had to be administered mid-examination when Stinner realized the lion was resisting being poked and prodded.

"A little more valium, please, doctor," Stinner joked as she and Evans held batons near Thomas' face. Those small, black batons would be the crowd's only protection if Thomas woke up, understandably angry at being jabbed with needles and having tubes stuck in his aching ear.

Thomas lives in a large pen with his brother Ra. They are normally inseparable. A prized photo of the two lions dozing together hangs inside the center's main building. But early Wednesday morning, Thomas was taken into a smaller holding area, away from Ra.

Ra watched through the fence at the entangled mass of strangers around his brother, pacing nervously. Moments after the examination began, Ra walked to the opposite edge of his pen and began a thunderous, anguished oofing.

The message was clear: "I am here. I am fine. But I'm not sure about my brother."

Within seconds, all the other lions oofed back in support. Ra slunk back to a shady patch and waited.

Inside Thomas' pen, Clark, Pillsbury and Dr. Brent A. Senior — also with the UNC School of Medicine — made the prognosis that Thomas will recover.

The ear infection had spread into the lion's middle ear, in an area between his jaw and skull, and also to the skin on the left side of his head. The good news was that Thomas' eardrum and hearing appeared unaffected by the bacteria and that the infection hadn't caused an abscess.

They prescribed several weeks of a strong antibiotic, which Jordan agreed to supply to Stinner, Evans and the keepers at the center.

Within a few weeks, Thomas ought to be back to normal: the king of beasts and a showman of his species.