

War Zone to Wild

UNITED KINGDOM, August 11, 2026
/EINPresswire.com/ -- Adolescent lions BenTzur and Ori, rescued from the illegal wildlife trade in Israel, have stepped out onto the land of their ancestors at the Animal Defenders International (ADI) Wildlife Sanctuary in Free State, South Africa.

The lions had been stranded for months due to the conflict in the middle east, with most flights grounded. Finally, they hitched a ride with the ADI team on a cargo flight from Tel Aviv which took them on a 50-hour journey via Cairo and Frankfurt before landing in Johannesburg.

Over a year ago, the 16-month-old lions were seized as tiny cubs by Israel's Nature & Parks Authority (NPA) during a crackdown on illegally trafficked animals. The youngsters had been torn from their mothers, when they should have been suckling, in order to be passed around as 'trophy pets' for photos, likes, and shares – the craze being fuelled by social media.

The happy journey's end, which saw the young lions striding through African grass, exploring and playing, highlights a problem which is reaching epidemic proportions.

Jan Creamer, ADI President: "These 'trophy pets' are animals like lions and tigers, taken from their mothers and kept in cruel, unnatural conditions as status symbols. They are treated as



Two young lions start new life in Africa after epic journey from Israel. Rescue highlights growing problem of online animal abuse.

fashion accessories for social media likes and then get dumped when the owners get bored, or the animals grow too big, dangerous and expensive to feed. These young animals suffer miserable lives, caged and in tiny spaces, deprived of their mother's love, social contact with their own kind, living in basements and on chains when they should be running free."

Ori was found in the basement of a house and BenTzur was tied to a tree in a backyard, on a short rope. ADI previously rescued six young lions in Kuwait, also trophy pets which had been dumped in the desert to die, or abandoned in the city, tied to lamp posts.

Social media is providing free advertising for a cruel and abusive trade, with accounts identified by ADI of 'influencers' with over 6 million followers, handling exotic animals, normalising and monetising animal abuse.

BenTzur and Ori had a lucky escape, and this week made the journey of a lifetime. With very few flights available due to the conflict, they flew from Tel Aviv to Cairo for a 2.5-hour stop over, and then on to Frankfurt, Germany for a 12-hour wait before leaving on their flight to Johannesburg.

ADI founders Jan Creamer and Tim Phillips flew with the lions to monitor them, topping up their water and using tongs to give them small pieces of meat prepared in advance, through a small hole in the crate.

Jan Creamer: "The lions travelled well, but it was a long journey, and they were very happy when we finally released them into their house at the ADI Wildlife Sanctuary. They rubbed heads, vocalised, and then curled up together on a nice hay bed to sleep. The other lions at the Sanctuary immediately knew there were new arrivals and announced their presence with roars, which made BenTzur and Ori sit up and listen. They were so young when they were taken, they will not have heard the communications of a lion pride."

Preparations had been made to account for the young lions arriving from the sweltering heat in Israel to mid-winter in South Africa. They were kept overnight in their heated house and given a light meal. On Wednesday morning came the moment we had all been waiting for, the doors were opened, and BenTzur and Ori stepped out onto the land nature intended, on grass, under the African sky, with sights and sounds of the wild all around them.

The lions have adapted very quickly to their new routine, responding to the voices of their carers, coming into their house to be fed. They have been enjoying toys like giant robust-a-balls and catnip sacks.

Jan Creamer: "All the stress of trying to get them here and the exhaustion of the journey were forgotten as they stepped out onto African soil. They had never walked on grass before and were cautious, then started to stride together through our dry, golden, winter grass, growing in confidence and looking around, hearing the voices of other lions, you could see they were where they were meant to be. Their instincts took over, and they methodically walked the whole 2.5-

acre habitat, mapping it out, noting where everything was, sitting on top of the platforms, investigating the dens underneath and playing with the toys.

“By the end of their third circuit, they knew where everything was in their territory, and laid on top of the platforms, looking and listening to the roars of their neighbours”.

The rescue proved to be very expensive, due to months of waiting, the scarcity of flights and escalating costs of aviation fuel, in addition to building a large secure habitat and a brick heated house. The charity is now looking to cover the cost of BenTzur and Ori's food, veterinary care, and care team for hopefully the next 20 years, and is appealing for support for these young lions who, despite all odds, have come home to Africa.

Due to in-breeding, early-age malnutrition, and associated genetic problems, as well as their close contact with humans, BenTzur and Ori can never return to the wild.

Donations can be made at <https://act.ad-international.org/page/185792/donate/1>

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