

The Bergen Record

Cub orphans tax refuge resources

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PETER MONSEES / THE RECORD

▲ A 4-month-old bear cub, one of nine, cooling off in a tub of water at the Woodlands Wildlife Refuge in Hunterdon County.

The state's lethal bear-control policy is producing a growing crowd of orphaned cubs whose fates are being left to a volunteer refuge.

And along with the number of cubs, the bills for their care are mounting steeply at the privately supported refuge, which the state says can expect no public funding.

Bears posing an "immediate threat" to humans are killed when caught, and mother bears rummaging for food in residential areas have been prominent recent victims. On just one day this month, in three separate incidents, three sows -- trailed by a total of eight cubs -- were shot and killed in Vernon.

The cubs were taken by the state Division of Fish and Wildlife to Tracy Leaver's Woodlands Wildlife Refuge in Hunterdon County, joining one brought there earlier. Leaver, the state's only black bear rehabilitation expert, has been raising orphaned cubs at her refuge and returning them to the wild since 1995.

But never have there been so many mouths to feed at one time.

"Usually, we have one or two," she said. "Now, all of a sudden, we've got nine. But we'll rise to the challenge. We've got to."

A big part of the challenge will be to raise enough money to obtain all the fruit, nuts and baby bear formula being consumed three times a day. Woodlands also needs to build a bigger pen to give the cubs room to roam -- and chain-link enclosures don't come cheap. Leaver estimated it will cost \$20,000 to build one.

But like other wildlife rehabilitation centers in New Jersey, Woodlands is a volunteer operation. It survives on private donations, and its nine newest residents have big appetites.

"The formula alone is costing us \$100 a day," Leaver said. "And food costs will rise as the bears get bigger."

Woodlands doesn't receive a dime from the state, and that's not likely to change, no matter how many orphan cubs end up there, according to the state Department of Environmental Protection.

The DEP doesn't intend to offer funding to Woodlands for cub care, says department spokeswoman Darlene Yuhas. She said there are more than 30 animal-rehabilitation centers across the state, and all of them are run on private donations. That's the way it's always been, and that's the way it's going to remain, Yuhas said.

"If we were to make an exception for one refuge, than we would have to make an exception for all of them," she said. "These are tight fiscal times and we are not in a position to do that."

Woodlands is the only refuge in the state licensed to rehabilitate bears. But there are all sorts of other animals living there as well -- raccoons, foxes, skunks, a turtle, even a lynx -- all of which have had, as Leaver puts it, "unfortunate encounters with humans" and are being nursed back to health for release back to the wild.

"That's why we call this the Second Chance Farm," Leaver said.

Eight of the cubs came from the Highland Lakes section of Vernon, where Fish and Wildlife Division officers shot the three mother bears rooting through back yards on June 7. The other cub was found wandering by the side of the road near Newton in Sussex County about a week before.

The Highland Lakes operation was an example of the state's "zero tolerance" policy for bears that wander into neighborhoods in search of food. After killing the mothers, Fish and Wildlife then captured the cubs, which had taken refuge in trees, by shooting them with tranquilizer darts.

Yuhas said that if a mother bear is posing a danger, then Fish and Wildlife would put her down, regardless of whether cubs would be orphaned. There's no plan to change the policy.

"Protecting the public is our first concern," she said. "Not whether the bear is a male, female, or has cubs."

She acknowledged that there's a potential for even more cubs to be orphaned if the state has to kill more sows this summer.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," she said.

Since their arrival at Woodlands, the cubs -- six males and three females -- have been living in two small chain-link enclosures. Three times a day, Leaver goes inside the pens to feed them, but otherwise leaves them alone, hoping that minimal contact with humans will help preserve their wild nature.

Leaver says all the cubs are about 4 months old and will remain at the farm for almost a year, after which they will be strong enough to fend for themselves and return to the wild. She said at 4 months, the cubs had "zero chance" of surviving without their mothers.

Leaver said the cubs arrived frightened and missing their mothers. "The first three nights they were here, they cried all night," she said, but seem to have adjusted well.

The next 11 months will be a delicate balancing act for Leaver and the volunteer staff at Woodlands. They won't be running the refuge like a zoo, where the animals can expect feed and water on schedule. Rather than feed the bears by hand, the staff will scatter food around the cage, which when constructed, should be about as large as an outdoor hockey rink and filled with shrubs and logs.

By scattering food, Leaver hopes the bears will continue to gather food by themselves. "There will be no handouts," Leaver said.

The food ration will be reduced as winter approaches and the bears go into their annual torpor. When spring comes, Leaver hopes to release the bears into the wild.

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Fast facts

The state ranks all bear sightings into three categories:

- **Category 1:** Bear exhibits behavior that is an "immediate threat" to humans, crops, or livestock. Bear is killed.
- **Category 2:** Bear is a nuisance, may be eating garbage, but not a threat to life or property. Bear is captured, adversely conditioned using rubber bullets or pyrotechnics and released onto nearest state land.
- **Category 3:** Bear exhibits normal behavior, not a threat to life or property. Bear is captured and released onto nearest state land.

Source: N.J. Comprehensive Black Bear Management Policy

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Donations can be made to the Woodlands Wildlife Refuge, PO Box 5046, Clinton, NJ 08809. To make an online donation to the refuge through its Web site, log on to northjersey.com/wildlife

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