

9 bear cubs put strain on refuge

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By Gene Robbins

ALEXANDRIA TWP. -- Eight black bear cubs, orphaned when their mothers were euthanized in Sussex County, will live for the next year in caring hands on a bucolic wildlife refuge here.

They'll join another young cub also brought there recently, giving the Woodlands Wildlife Refuge a challenge as it fulfills its mission.

The refuge will need a lot of help, says Tracy Leaver, founder and executive director of the refuge, the only such place in New Jersey where wildlife like bears can legally be rehabilitated for release back into the wild.

It'll cost \$100 a day for formula alone for the next two to three weeks as they wean the nine onto solid food, since they would still be nursing at their tender age. And the refuge will have to build a permanent, secure enclosure to give them room as they grow.

Eight cubs were brought in following three incidents last week in Vernon, near the edge of Wawayanda State Park, where bears seeking food entered homes. Local police or state wildlife biologists found and had to shoot the bears. The cubs were found nearby or netted in trees.

The other cub had been found two weeks ago along the road near Newton, said Leaver. Some of the cubs wear ear tags from the state's winter research program. They are about 4-5 months old, born in the depths of winter.

Working with bears isn't new to the refuge; a week ago it relocated its 25th bear, she said. These cubs, like others, will be returned to their home range, so as not to disturb the indigenous population ratio.

But getting nine at once has "multiplied our workload 10 times," said Leaver.

The cubs, perhaps 10-15 pounds now, will live at the refuge until they grow to about 100 pounds or more, about the size at which mom would naturally kick them out of the den. Not much other training is needed, she said; they are hard-wired to survive in the wild, she said.

The cubs live in temporary wire pens, with dishes of a mixture of dry dog food, grapes, carrots and squash, and pans of infant formula that the bears will learn to lap on their own. They sleep under a roof or in old pet carrying cages.

They are immeasurably cute right now, until they stand up against the wire fence, hanging on by their ominous-looking claws. The cubs playfully wrestle with stuffed Teddy bears and other animals, or punch around rubber balls.

"I'm so happy we are capable to do this kind of work," said Leaver. "It's why we're here, and it gives these cubs a second chance."

The cubs will put a huge strain on the nonprofit organization's resources, she said. "We will rise to the occasion, but we can use all the help we can get," she said. People could call her at 730-8300 or write to P.O. Box 5046, Clinton 08809. Updates on the bears will be posted at woodlandswildlife.org.

Leaver has acceded to intense media attention in the last week because of the need to publicize the plea for donations. "I had my power trip last Friday," she said. "I told the television station to send their helicopter away."

The cubs are a reminder of the perils of bears coming into too-close contact with humans. The state is investigating whether someone may have been feeding the bears, inviting them to become used to meals near homes.

"It only takes one or two deliberate feedings for bears to get the idea this is a place for food," said Department of Environmental Protection spokeswoman Darlene Yuhas. When there is no food outside, the bears are smart enough to check out the house. One bear ransacked a kitchen, she said.

She said the DEP has "zero tolerance" for people who deliberately feed bears, and has aired radio advertisements and gone door-to-door in areas like Vernon to educate people about such things as bringing in garbage cans and keeping bird feeders neat.

"It only takes one neighbor who feeds bears to create a serious situation for the entire neighborhood," said Yuhas.

Leaver said she was heartbroken the mother bears had to be killed.

"I hope the three deaths will stand as a reminder to towns in New Jersey to take care so animals don't come closer to our homes so we're not the ones getting them into trouble," she said.

"But, it's incredibly awesome to talk about black bears and New Jersey in the same sentence. We should be proud of that and respect it," she said.