

Orphaned bear cubs get bigger digs

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BY JIM WRIGHT
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Seven bear cubs orphaned in northwest New Jersey in June moved into new and bigger digs at a Hunterdon County rehab center Saturday.



CHRIS PEDOTA / THE RECORD

The yearlings, among 10 cubs being raised at the Woodlands Wildlife Refuge in Alexandria, will now learn to fend for themselves so they can be released back into the wild.

"Ordinarily, their moms would kick them out in late May or early June, so that's when we're going to kick them out," said Tracy Leaver, director of the non-profit refuge and the only certified black bear rehabilitator in New Jersey.

The usually frisky cubs, which came to the refuge weighing just 10 to 12 pounds, now weigh 10 times that. When they are fully grown in four years, they could be as much as 500 pounds, said Kelcey Burgess, Black Bear Project leader for the state Division of Fish and Wildlife.

Burgess and five other Fish and Wildlife personnel tranquilized the animals, weighed them, tattooed identification numbers inside their mouths and took blood and tissue samples for the state's extensive black bear database. Then, with the help of volunteers, they carried the hefty cubs about 25 yards into a large L-shaped enclosure built over the past six weeks to house the rapidly growing bears.

The enclosure, surrounded by an 8-foot-high electrified fence, includes a tree for the cubs to climb and dens made of cement culvert pipes where the cubs will live.

When the cubs -- and three others, who share a nearby enclosure -- are released at undisclosed locations in the wilds of northwestern New Jersey in late spring, they will become part of the state's long-term black bear study, which charts everything from the bears' habits to their habitats.

Eight of the cubs were orphaned in Vernon after three mother bears were caught rummaging for food in residential areas. The mothers were deemed dangerous and killed by the state Department of Environmental Protection and their offspring were transported to Woodlands.

Leaver said she hoped the deaths of the mothers "ring really loud to the general public that it's not OK to promote our wild neighbors coming closer to us by leaving food out or encouraging them. We're not doing them any favors. They don't need our help."

So far, the cost of raising the cubs has reached \$50,000, including \$30,000 for the fenced enclosure. Leaver said that because the refuge receives no state or federal funding, she has had to rely on donations generated by media coverage of the cubs. So far, those donations have not kept up with expenses -- which include \$700 a week in acorns, dried dog food, fruit and vegetables.

Since 1995, Woodlands has rehabbed and released more than 25 bears back into the wild and none has become a problem or nuisance bear, Leaver said. These cubs will be released in the general vicinity of where they were found -- just far away from human beings.

The refuge is holding a Mardi Gras Gala on Feb. 29 at the Hunterdon Hills Playhouse in Hampton to raise money for the cubs and the 600 other orphaned or injured animals it rehabilitates each year. For information: woodlandswildlife.org

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