

Refuge has enough cubs to field a team

Wildlife center is struggling to care for 9 orphaned bears

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New Jersey's bear orphanage is overflowing.

The arrival of three, 6-month-old bruins yesterday afternoon brought the guest list to nine cubs at the nonprofit Woodlands Wildlife Refuge in Alexandria Township. It is the only facility certified by the state to care for orphaned and injured bears, and it needs money.

"We're at a crisis. We've never had this many, and we're breaking our budget," said Woodlands Director Tracy Leaver, cooling off one of the week's new arrivals with water, as the cub struggled to wake from tranquilization.

The cubs started to arrive on Tuesday, after one female bear was shot in Vernon Township for breaking into a home and her two cubs were gathered by the state Division of Fish and Wildlife. By Thursday afternoon, three more cubs arrived--the offspring of another bear shot that day in the same Sussex County town by police after it too broke into a home.

Before the day was out, the state killed yet another bear for the same offense, in the same town, and her three cubs arrived on Leaver's doorstep yesterday afternoon.

"We also had one other cub brought in 10 days ago after it was found in Newton by police. It's going to cost about \$100 per day to feed all nine cubs for now, because I have them on formula," said Leaver. "But that will double and triple as they grow, and that cost does not include the \$20,000 needed to build a new holding cage for them as they get bigger."

She put out a plea for donations, promising to update the public on the progress of the cubs on her Web site, www.woodlandswildlife.org. Contributions, she said, can be made on the Web site or by mail to Woodlands Wildlife Refuge, PO Box 5046, Clinton, N.J. 08809.

New Jersey licenses about 40 wildlife rehabilitation facilities, most of them restricted to helping small mammals or birds that are injured or orphaned. The goal is to prepare them for release back into the wild.

Leaver cares for 600 orphans and patients annually, and got her first bear cub in 1995. Since then, she and her staff of two part-timers and 45 volunteers have helped 25 bears return to the wilds. But nine cubs at one time is a tall order.

"This breaks our record by four. We had six bears in 2005, and even that was a lot of work," Leaver said.

The cubs are 6 months old, and it may take until next spring to prepare them for release. Leaver also must brace for the possible arrival of more cubs as New Jersey continues to grapple with its booming bear population.

Unsecured trash has been blamed for most bear visits to human habitat. But the state Department of Environmental Protection is investigating reports that some people in Vernon may actually be inviting bears into their yards.

"That area was included twice in May in our door-to-door sweep," said DEP spokeswoman Darlene Yuhas, referring to a state campaign to educate people about bears after a proposed hunt was canceled last year.

"We found that most people seemed to know what they should be doing. The reports we hear now is, someone is deliberately feeding bears there," Yuhas added.

Last year, the state prosecuted a Vernon man for feeding a mother bear and her cubs by placing candy on his head and allowing them to swipe at it. The area also is home to some animal welfare activists who fed bears by hand several years ago to demonstrate to news reporters how docile bears can be.

Biologists contend female bears that feed around homes will teach their cubs to do the same.

"It's killing bears with love," said Leaver of people who feed bears.

As she nurtured one cub, its two siblings snarled and clawed at state wildlife technician Tony McBride as he tried to retrieve them from a steel container. The bears all landed in two outdoor pens, where they greeted their caretakers with a mix of curiosity and fear.

Occasionally growling and hissing, they also ran around the cages, climbing and swinging from tree limbs that Leaver had placed inside. The lone cub found in Newton was the boldest, poking its paw out of the cage and swiping at passersby.

"We try not to name them. They're only here for a short time," said Leaver. "But somehow that one already got named Wicks."