

## Orphaned bear cubs move to new habitat

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The eight cuddly-looking, puppy-sized orphaned bear cubs rescued last June in the Lake Wanda neighborhood now have grown as big as ponies — and they are still growing. Fish and Wildlife officials rescued the cubs in June after shooting their mothers as “nuisance bears.”

Shortly after the Lake Wanda cubs arrived at Woodlands Wildlife Refuge in Hunterdon County, two more lone cubs were brought in.

Since June, the young bears have been the wards of Tracy Leaver who runs the refuge. Leaver and her staff of 45 volunteers have been raising the rambunctious bruins to have the savvy to return to the forest to earn their livings as wild bears.

On Saturday, the moment had come to move seven of the 10 yearling bear cubs to their new habitat at the refuge. The move also provided an opportunity for fish and wildlife officials to weigh, measure and test the cubs.

Tranquilizing the bears can be risky, and one in every 300 bears dies from an adverse reaction to the tranquilizers.

But within hours, all the young bears were awake and playing in their new spacious habitat. Two of them had climbed the trees.

The 5,550-square-foot fenced enclosure cost \$30,000 to build, even though volunteers supplied most of the labor. A single anonymous donor contributed the money.

When the cubs arrived they were still nursing from bottles, but today they are unruly teenaged bears who top the scales at more than 100 pounds, and together eat their way through roughly 100 pounds of acorns, fruit and dry dog food a day.

Leaver and her staff have been returning young bears to the wilds since 1995. The exact location where the bears are released always is kept confidential.

Of the 25 bears Leaver has rehabilitated at the refuge, not one has gotten in trouble with the law. Each bear is tagged and tattooed for easy tracking before being released into the same general area where it had been found. The collars are made to drop off after a time.

Kelcey Burgess, Bear Project manager for N.J. Fish and Wildlife said that some time in the future, he hopes to install microchips in each of the bears caught and released to enable even more precise tracking.

The refuge is the only facility the state has certified to care for orphaned or injured bears, and staff there have cared for hundreds of wild creatures over the 25 years it has been in business. The bears joined the collection of raccoon babies, squirrels, opossums, turtles and one bullfrog already guests at the refuge.

Considering the deaths of the three mother bears, Leaver said that the bears won't have died in vain if their deaths help raise public awareness about the measures people should be taking to avoid drawing wild creatures to civilization.

"Some people think they are helping the bears by feeding them, but they are misguidedly killing them with love. Wild animals deserve to be kept wild. Let's respect their wildness by being sure to control our garbage, remove our bird feeders and bear-proof our commercial dumpsters.

"We exist to give a second chances to animals who have had conflicts with humans, and we are happy to have been on the other end of this situation."

To make a donation, write to Leaver at Woodlands Wildlife Refuge, P.O. Box 5046, Clinton, NJ 08809 or visit [www.woodlandswildlife.org](http://www.woodlandswildlife.org) for more information and updates on the bear cubs.