

Bear hugs and kisses

Two cute cubs so endeared themselves to Amanda Burton on a visit to Idaho that she became anything but a silent witness to their fate

There's no question who the stars are in the *Born to Be Wild* documentary *Black Bear Rescue*. Young bears Tippe and Techumseh may be sharing the limelight with one of Britain's best known actresses, Amanda Burton - the star of, among other dramas, *Silent Witness* - but when it comes to dominating the camera, the pair with the paws win hands down.

In normal circumstances, a leading lady might object to being upstaged, but on this occasion, Burton hasn't minded one bit. "I was delighted when I was asked if I'd like to go over to Idaho and make a documentary on orphaned bears," says Burton, who arrived for the interview hotfoot from recording her voice-over narrative track for the film. "It was lovely just for once not to be surrounded by a great big production crew, like you get on most drama sets. On this shoot, there were only five of us. The hard part was having to remember to look straight at the camera lens. As an actress, I've spent 20 years carefully avoiding eye contact with the camera, but that doesn't work so well when you're presenting a documentary."

Another tough requirement was not to get too emotional -and that was easier said than done. The film begins in the depths of winter in the Payette National Forest in Idaho, where Tippe and Techumseh, two newly orphaned, ten-week-old cubs, are found rolling around in the snow. Their mother has been knocked down and killed by a car, and with wolves closing in, the chances of them surviving are slim.

Fortunately, they are spotted and rescued by state wildlife rangers and handed over to Sally Maughan, an everyday Idaho woman who started out looking after the odd stray cub and is now the founder and president of what is grandly called the Idaho Black Bear Rehabilitation Centre, but is really just her house and back garden. She becomes Tippe and Techumseh's surrogate mother for a year, building them up before releasing them back into the wild.

"Sally is one of the most extraordinary women I have ever met," says Burton. "When she took the bears in they needed to be fed every two hours, both day and night, and not once did I see her miss a feed." Maughan cares for an average of ten orphaned bear cubs a year. Across North America, where 600,000 black bears still live in the wild, it's thought that hundreds of cubs lose their mothers each year, because of hunters, car accidents or simply by becoming separated from them.

Her rehabilitation efforts are supported by a British-based charity, the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA). A new enclosure seen at the end of the film being constructed on land behind Maughan's house is being built with money bequested by one of the charity's supporters in the south of England.

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Over an 18-month period, Burton made three trips to Idaho to check on Tippe and Techumseh's progress, having in the process to face sub-zero temperatures and lots of flying, something she's not keen on. And all of this in the midst of a hectic UK filming schedule, which included more *Silent Witness* dramas, the title role in a new thriller about money-laundering called *The Whistle-Blower* (to be shown in the new year) and this week's feature-length *Little Bird* (Wednesday ITV, not Scottish or Grampian), in which Burton plays a social worker.

So what made the air journeys worth it was the joy of being reunited with her two furry friends. "Each time I saw them I was amazed at how much they had grown and developed," she says. "On the first trip, I could pick them up and cuddle them in my arms. On the second trip, I could play with them in their cage, but by the third trip, they were getting pretty wild."

Which meant it was time to take Tippe and Techumseh out of Maughan's back garden, with all its warm hay and creature comforts, and place them back into their natural habitat - the harsh forest wilderness - in time for hibernation. There was no doubt in Burton's mind that returning them to the wild was the right thing to do, but that didn't prevent her having the occasional late-night stab of anxiety.

"You thought about them huddled out there in the cold, and you couldn't help worrying that somewhere deep inside they were missing all those hugs and cuddles," says Burton - and yes, she has been doing a bit of crying. "I wept at the time we let them go, and I wept again in the studio just now, watching it on film. It was a sad feeling, but happy-sad."

Of course, any sentimental notions about wild bears were firmly dispelled when Burton met a live, full-grown grizzly deep in the Payette National Forest. Admittedly, he was tranquillised at the time, but she still marvelled at the creature's sheer power, bulk and smell. "I find it impossible to describe that bear smell accurately," she says. "All I can say is that it was very warm, very strong and totally unmistakeable. Sort of cosy, but at the same time very animal."

Given the chance, Burton would love to go back to Idaho, this time with her two daughters (her photographer husband, Sven Amstein, has already been, and took the photographs used this week in *Radio Times*). "I consider it a privilege and an honour to have watched those two cubs grow;" she says. "It was a real life-changing experience."

Nowhere does that come across more vividly than when, in an unashamedly fluffy scene, Burton is seen nuzzling up to a drowsy-eyed, damp-nosed, newly fed bear cub. In a blissful whisper, she tells the camera: "It's like being in heaven."