

She's a small-town travel agent on a big-time mission: **to save orphaned cubs**

# Den Mother

BY JEFF RENNICKE

**I**T'S NEARLY 3 A.M. A light glows in a house on Arney Lane. Like many mothers of three-month-old twins, Sally Maughan of Garden City, Idaho, is up heating bottles of formula and wiping chins. But there is a difference: The babies she's caring for are bundles of bawling fur and sharp claws.

This suburban neighborhood with paved streets and neatly clipped lawns is a surprising place to find baby bears. And no one is more surprised than Maughan.

The 56-year-old travel agent volunteered for years with Idaho's Fish and Game department, nursing injured raccoons or foxes. But nothing prepared her for the call she got in 1989. Fish and Game had an orphaned four-month-old cub named Ruggles. Could she raise him? Maughan says, "I could have told you more about frogs in the Seychelles than about bears. It never occurred to me that there were orphaned bear cubs."

So she began researching the subject, and turned to a Fish and Game bear expert, John Beecham. Each year thousands

PHOTOGRAPHED BY ERIK BUTLER

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Sally Maughan's two-acre yard is an outdoor playpen for eight-month-old Makana.



of female black bears are killed by hunters, hit by cars or caught in forest fires, leaving behind untold numbers of cubs. Without protection and nursing by the sow, many cubs starve or are killed by predators.

Those saved by humans often fare little better. "You can't give bear cubs away like puppies," says Beecham, now with the Wildlife Conservation Society. Zoos usually have no room, so for decades wildlife officials with few options routinely euthanized the orphaned cubs.

The more Maughan learned, the more pity she felt. Within weeks, a 15-pound living teddy bear was staying in a spare room. "I'd hold him during feedings and stare into those dark eyes. He was the gentlest spirit I've ever known," says Maughan, who never married or had children of her own. "That was it—I was hooked."

But Ruggles quickly went from cute and cuddly to "a four-footed hurricane." At five months he'd scatter food across the room, and growl and charge anyone doing anything he didn't like.

Maughan could not imagine what she'd done wrong to turn Ruggles wild overnight. She called Beecham in a panic. He laughed. "The wild behavior was a sign she was doing things right," Beecham says. Ruggles was feeling comfortable enough to be a bear.

"Bears go through the same stages as human children," Maughan says now. "They just do it in months instead of years." Overnight, it seemed, Ruggles had hit his "terrible twos."

By the time the aspen leaves turned

gold on the mountainsides, Ruggles had grown to over 100 pounds and lived in an enclosure behind the house. As winter set in, he grew lethargic and sleepy, getting ready to hibernate. It was time for Ruggles to be released.

**O**N A NOVEMBER DAY with a hint of a chill in the air, Maughan and Beecham transported Ruggles to an area in the nearby mountains. There, after tranquilizing and tagging him, Ruggles was left to wake up surrounded by wilderness, with but a faint memory of people. As Maughan turned to leave, the first pangs of emptiness hit her.

For weeks she couldn't face the sight of the empty pen where Ruggles had lived. Despite the feeling of loss, she asked herself, Could she go on knowing that many orphaned black bear cubs like Ruggles were dying because they had no home? She could not; her mission was clear.

"It was as though someone put my hands on the wheel and said just keep the car on the road, and we'll get there somehow," Maughan recalls. Wildlife experts said it was unlikely her plan would work, that bears raised by humans would starve in the wild or become garbage bears. But Maughan knew she had to try. And the Idaho Black Bear Rehab Program was born.

Maughan rearranged her work hours to spend more time at home. She sold her car, took out a loan, and used credit cards to buy supplies. She borrowed tools and coerced skeptical



**To wean older bear cubs like Makana from humans, Maughan had to learn to resist their playfulness.**

friends to help build several enclosures behind her home, including a 160-gallon swim tub and tree trunks to climb.

Almost as soon as she opened the doors, state wildlife officials brought bear cubs. They came in spring, some only a few weeks old. They came in summer, as many as 22 in a year when forest fires ravaged the West. They came from Idaho, Wyoming, Utah and California. They came alone, frightened and skinny, and sometimes they came in pairs, like Griz and Cheyenne.

A hunter had shot a bear and found the cubs curled against the dead female. Fish and Game called Sally.

They were three months old and traumatized. The pair became agitated anytime Sally left their sight. "The early months are a time of nurturing," says Maughan. "I don't mean cuddling and kissing. It is more a matter of letting them know you are there, making them feel secure. It's something the female usually does for them. I guess I become their mom."

And the cubs put "Momma Bear" to the test. "Griz had his own ideas of who was in control, and it seldom fit with my idea of things," says Maughan.



For feedings, "he had to have the bottle with the red cap, and heaven forbid I didn't have the second bottle ready when he finished with the first!"

They threw temper tantrums, ripped holes in the floors. Curious, bolder and more secure, Griz and Cheyenne once tore a window screen and escaped. A neighbor called to report bears in her bushes. That's when the pair moved into the pens.

There Griz and Cheyenne sped through their "teenage" period—they grew reckless, daring, and at breakneck speed.

At six months, Griz weighed some 60 pounds, Cheyenne about 40. By late summer they would consume a 40-pound bag of dry dog food, reduce a road-killed deer to fur and bone in a few days, and empty buckets of fruit (frozen grapes were their favorite). They ate just about anything—wild foods such as grasses and willow, acorns, even wasps and bees.

By fall the cuddly cubs were big, powerful animals. Maughan cautiously entered the enclosure for cleaning and feedings. She almost never felt in danger, but play did get rough.

Once, she entered the enclosure to clean while Griz played in the swim tub. As she bent to pick something up, Maughan was suddenly hit from behind by 80 pounds of bear. Griz had slammed into her, grasped her in a

## Bad News Bears?

**T**HIS YEAR, black bears made headlines for the wrong reasons: two attacks on humans, one in New York, one in Idaho. While spying a black bear in the wild may be common—they live in most Western states and from Mississippi to Maine—deadly encounters are rare (52 deaths in the past 100 years). Still, it's smart to know what to do if a bear comes too close for comfort.

- Keep at least 15 feet between the two of you. The bear wants an escape route too.
- If a bear charges, do NOT lie in a fetal position. Wave your arms and make lots of noise. The bigger and badder you seem, the better.
- Bears near your burbs? If you have a bird feeder outside your home, store it nightly to avoid tempting the average bear.
- When camping, don't simply store food in backpacks. Seal the food, and its smell, in a bear-resistant plastic container.
- For more bear facts, visit the North American Bear Center's website, [bear.org](http://bear.org).

bear hug so tight "you couldn't have squeezed a pencil between us," and began biting her back. "He was just playing. Still, I realized this could be serious because he was so strong." After what seemed like an hour, Cheyenne ran up, distracting Griz and allowing Maughan to push her arm into his mouth as a warning to settle down. Griz paused, and she slipped out of the enclosure, shaken but unharmed.

Maughan was dealing with crea-

tures of the wild; she knew that was where they belonged. As the temperature dropped and the first snow began to fall, the bears slowed—nature's call to begin slipping into a long winter's sleep. Maughan cut back their food to simulate conditions in the wild.

Cheyenne and Griz were moved into the mountains. As Maughan watched them placed in a den prepared by wildlife biologists, tears ran down her face. Tears of joy for bears regaining their freedom? Tears of sadness for letting go? "Maybe," she says, smiling, "a little of both. A part of me goes with every bear we release."

Of the 80 bears reared by Maughan thus far, only two have become "problem bears," proving the experts wrong. And several other black bear rehab centers are building on Maughan's work. "What Sally has

done is a tremendous achievement," says Victor Watkins of the World Society for the Protection of Animals, which helps fund the bears' care. "She's giving second chances to young bears, and proving they can be cared for by humans and successfully returned to the wild."

Success, however, doesn't make letting go any easier. "From the start Sally knows the bears are being raised to be released," John Beecham says. "But they are like her children, and it hurts when she has to turn them loose."

Researchers monitoring the den know Griz and Cheyenne made it through the winter and left the shelter in spring. Nothing more was ever heard of them. "As far as we know they are still out there being bears," Sally says. Which is just the way she wants it.

### JUST LIKE HOME



At the next table in a fast food restaurant, one youngster was sobbing because he didn't get the toy he wanted with his food. Another dumped his drink over his sister's burger because she was stealing his fries. Then the smallest child fell off his chair.

Clearly at the end of her rope, the mother dragged the boy up from the floor, placed him back in his chair and said, "Shut up, all of you, and eat your Happy Meals."

JENNIFER SMITH

### GOOD QUESTION!

How do you know when it's time to tune your bagpipes?

THOMAS SUGIMURA