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It's a bear's life

Rehabilitation center in Boise rescues orphaned black bear cubs

By Ray Grass
Deseret Morning News

SALT LAKE CITY — The story started with three bears — three very little bears. It ended a few weeks back, game officers say, when three much larger bears were released back into the mountains of Utah to begin foraging for berries, digging for worms and, hopefully, avoiding humans.

The three black bears were orphaned as cubs, found last summer and put under the care of Sally Maughan, who raised them.

Maughan, or "Mama Bear" to many young cubs, lives outside Boise and runs the Black Bear Rehabilitation Center. The three cubs from Utah were sent to this Idaho center.

Unfortunately, not all orphaned cubs are lucky enough to find their way to Idaho. Not all orphaned cubs survive long enough to be found. And, even if they were, there's not room or money enough at this time to care for all of them.

Maughan started caring for cubs 15 years ago, she recalled in a telephone interview this week, paying for all expenses with her own money. Eventually, demands were higher than her income, and she faced closing the center. An animal-care group offered enough help to keep the center open.

Still, she said with a sigh, she survives on donations



Scott Root / Utah Division of Wildlife Resources
via Deseret Morning News / AP

In this photo taken in 2002, the smallest of three rescued black bear cubs, plays on the lawn at the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources central region office in Springville, Utah, before being transferred to the Idaho Black Bear Rehabilitation Center in Boise.

and what extra money she can provide from her pocket. It can cost as much as \$800 or \$900 to raise a young cub to an age where it can survive on its own.

In this case, one cub was caught in an illegal snare trap. A second was orphaned when its mother was illegally killed during hunting season, and the third was left alone when a vehicle killed its mother.

Usually, Maughan gets the cubs in the summer and raises them until December. At that point, they are taken into the mountains and placed in dens to hibernate and begin life on their own.

When found, the Utah cubs weighed 9, 15 and 30 pounds. When released, the two smaller bears weighed about 105 pounds and the larger one nearly 120 pounds.

In the case of the three Utah cubs, Maughan felt they were too small to survive hibernation, so she cared for them over the winter and returned them to the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources in June. Two officers took the three into the Manti-LaSal National Forest, quietly opened their cages and watched as the bears set off into their new surroundings.

After their stay in Idaho, the young bears "should have the skills necessary to survive in the wild," said Dave Hintze, one of the two DWR biologists involved in the release.

Maughan concurred, even though there was concern over contact with humans, and a greater concern over the association between humans and food.

"I try to bottle feed when

necessary," she said, explaining the rearing process. "Yes, there's a bond there. They see me as their mom. If they come to me when they're weaned, then it's a different relationship. They don't know what I am. They see me as a bear, as long as I've got other cubs around me."

Experience has shown that the bears see the enclosures in Idaho as a safe area. Once out of the enclosures, instincts take over.

The greatest fear is that the young bears, now comfortable with human contact, will become nuisance bears or won't be afraid to raid cabins or ice boxes or forage through garbage cans to search for food. Such bears usually have to be destroyed.

Of the 89 bears raised and released from Maughan's center, only two became nuisances. And in both cases, she said, both bears were very difficult to handle.

In the compounds, the young bears are fed dog food, fruits and vegetables, branches from a willow tree and, on occasion, frozen yogurt.

When they're released, Maughan said, "We've done studies that show they have no trouble adapting to available foods, such as berries, worms, ants and an occasional field mouse."

Last year, Maughan raised six bear cubs to their release age. And she hopes their stories will end as well as the three bears from Utah.