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No more room at the rehab center for orphaned black bears

Public responds: People have rescued more orphaned bears this year than ever before. They will be re-introduced into the wild

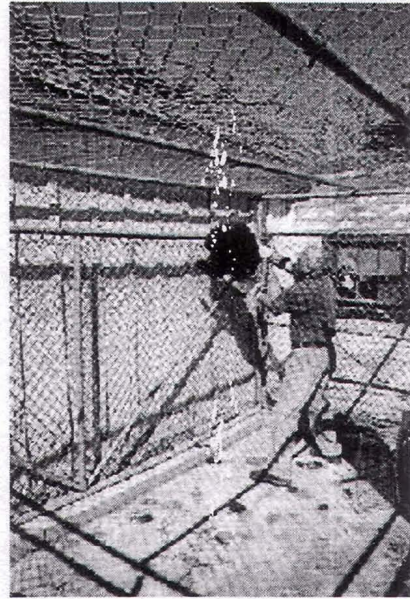
By Brett Prettyman
The Salt Lake Tribune

Orphaned wildlife is nothing new in the West, but changing attitudes about how to handle abandoned youngsters have pushed the Idaho Black Bear Rehab Center near Boise to its limits.

The center is currently holding 34 black bear cubs, including 12 sent from Utah this year. Next to Idaho, Utah has sent the most bears to the facility. Bears also have been sent there from Washington, Wyoming and Oregon.

"It seems like there has been a change in the attitude about predators and I'm thrilled to death to have so many," said Sally Maughan, who started the center 16 years ago. "For so long people weren't going out and getting [orphaned cubs]. We had 23 a couple of years ago and I joked we should go for two dozen. Now we are close to three dozen and I'm going to stop talking."

Miles Moretti, acting director of the Utah



Dave Hintze, central region supervisor for the Division of Wildlife Resources, catches a bear cub in October. The bear was brought to the Idaho Black Bear Rehab Center, and will be released into the wild. (Scott Root/Utah Division of Wildlife Resources)

Division of Wildlife Resources (DWR), agrees that there has been a shift in the way wildlife officials and the public think about



A couple of black bear cubs explore their pen at the Idaho Black Bear Rehab Center near Boise. The center is holding 34 black bear cubs. (Idaho Black Bear Rehab and Belinda Isley)

orphaned cubs.

"There was a change in philosophy," Moretti said. "We have learned that we have to take care of these animals . . . that it is part of our responsibility."

Bear cubs are orphaned by many causes. Sometimes the mother bear is hit by a car, and occasionally the family becomes separated after entering urban areas.

Moretti said orphans rarely result from hunters killing sows with cubs, but he acknowledged that it does happen. More

frequently, cubs become orphans when sows are killed for being problem bears.

Kevin Bunnell, mammals coordinator for the DWR, said only three cubs were sent to Boise in 2003.

All the bears brought to Maughan are returned to their home states. Utah officials try to release the animals near the areas from which they came, especially if they are females, in an effort to keep populations as close to natural as possible. Bunnell said the 12 cubs will be released in May.

Maughan said all the cubs currently at the center were born earlier this year and will be released after denning at the facility, which is her preferred method when young bears arrive late in the year. Cubs brought to Boise in the spring and summer are typically taken to existing dens during winter months so they awaken as free animals with the thaw.

Moretti said wildlife officials in years past would occasionally try to keep cubs at regional offices to place in dens when winter arrived, but that it

proved a time-consuming task.

"Sally has done a great job with the cubs and keeping them from becoming too acclimated to humans," he said. "We have had good luck with the cubs we release from her place. They don't seem to associate food with humans like some bears that spend time with people do."

There are several wildlife rehabilitation

centers in Utah, but none are licensed to handle black bears. Maughan has a

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permit from Idaho for her operation.

Maughan has returned 89 bears to the wild after they spent time at her center and boasts that only two have had to be moved or put down for conflicts with humans.

"It is just a matter of providing them food and letting them go through the stages of development," Maughan said. "I don't have to teach them what or how to eat or how to behave. I put them with other bears so they can learn through play behavior."

While Maughan is pleased to have so many cubs, the facility can't handle any more bears. She is hoping the public will provide the means to build more enclosures.

bpretty@sltrib.com

Idaho Black Bear Rehab Center

The center has 34 bears, 12 of them from Utah.

Cubs typically spend less than a year at the center.

Bears are eventually released in their home state.

Eighty-nine cubs have been released back into the wild and only two have become "problem" bears.

To help the center through financial or material donations, e-mail info@bearrehab.org or call 208-853-3105.

For more information on the center, visit [http:// www.bearrehab.org/](http://www.bearrehab.org/) on the Web.