

UTAH DIVISION OF WILDLIFE RESOURCES • AUTUMN 2006

wildlife

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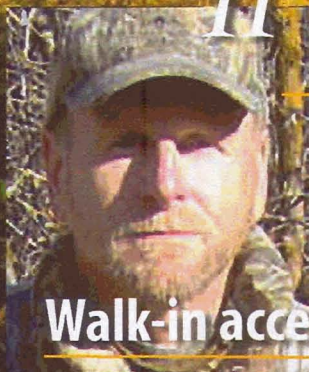
Bears

Rehabilitation gives orphaned cubs a chance

Urban geese

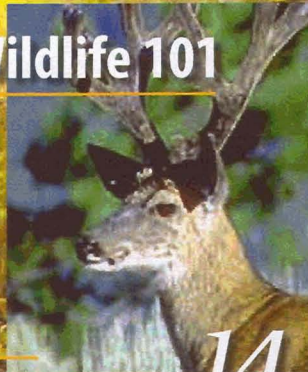
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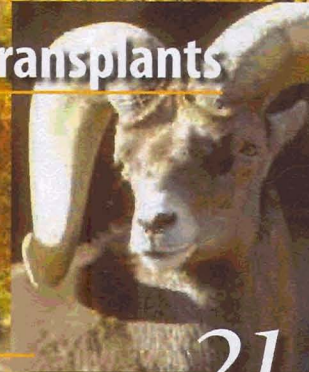
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By KEVIN BUNNELL
Mammals Program Coordinator

Bringing up bears

A private rehabilitation center is giving orphaned bears a chance for life.

DURING the summer and fall, the Division of Wildlife Resources occasionally picks up bear cubs that have been abandoned or orphaned. Thanks to the efforts of a private rehabilitator, these cubs now have a bright future.

Going it alone

Several things can cause a black bear cub to become separated from its mother.

In Utah and other dry states, there is a strong correlation between drought and the number of bear cubs that are found abandoned or orphaned. Because of drought, adult females are sometimes forced to abandon their cubs simply because they can't find enough food to feed themselves and also provide for their offspring.

In 2004, Utah experienced below-

normal snowfall, a dry spring and a hot, dry summer. The lack of moisture resulted in very little food for the bears, especially in the mountains of eastern Utah. During late summer and early fall, UDWR personnel found 14 bear cubs

that had been abandoned by their mothers.

In contrast, above-normal winter and spring moisture in 2005 provided Utah's bears with plenty of food, and no bear cubs were found orphaned or abandoned that year.

Rehab and release

In 2003, the UDWR instituted a policy for rehabilitating orphaned and abandoned bear cubs.

If a black bear cub is found alone, and UDWR biologists determine that its mother is not going to return, the cub is taken to the Idaho Black Bear Rehabilitation Center (IBBR) in Garden City, Idaho. Operated by wildlife rehabilitator Sally Maughan, the IBBR accepts and rehabilitates cubs from several Western states, including Idaho, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming. Since the IBBR opened in 1989, the facility has cared for more than 150 bear cubs, most of which have been successfully released back into the wild.

In fall 2004, the 14 bear cubs that were found orphaned or abandoned in Utah (nine males and five females) were taken to the IBBR. After months of successful rehabilitation, the cubs were scheduled for release in the Book Cliffs in June 2005, when the cubs would be more than one year old.

Before their release, all of the cubs were fitted with breakaway radio collars and numbered ear tags. Breakaway col-



DWR employees prepare to release a rehabilitated bear into the wild.



The author holds a small bear that will be turned over to a rehabilitator.

lars were used because fixed-size collars could become too tight and could constrict the breathing of the young bears as they continued to grow.

The bears also were weighed. All of the males (averaging 183 pounds) and the females (averaging 94 pounds) were significantly larger than yearling bears would be in the wild, which was probably due to the unlimited food available to them at the IBBR. This extra fat provided the bears with important energy reserves that would ease their transition when they were released into their new and unfamiliar surroundings.

The UDWR and Brigham Young University have worked together to determine the success of the IBBR's rehabilitation program by studying how the cubs became acclimated after being released into natural, but unfamiliar, habitat.

On June 2, 2005, the bears were released at two locations in East Canyon in the southeast portion of the Book Cliffs. The bears were let out of their traps two at a time. Most of the bears

quickly disappeared into the brush surrounding the release site, but a few climbed nearby trees.

After the release, Josh Heward of BYU monitored the bears on a weekly basis, using radio-telemetry on the ground and from an airplane. He found that the bears quickly adjusted to their natural setting and began to disperse from the release site by the middle of June. Shortly after they were released, the bears also began finding and eating natural foods. Heward found evidence of the bears feeding on insects, grass, berries and meat as he monitored them through the summer.

Twelve of the 14 bears survived through the summer and fall in the Book Cliffs. One of the bears that did not survive was found on August 1 near a highway just south of the Douglas Pass in Colorado. An autopsy found no broken bones, so it's unlikely that the bear died from a collision with a vehicle. Its cause of death is unknown.

The second bear was taken by a hunter in late August.

Of the 12 surviving bears, two males dispersed more than 50 miles into Colorado, and the collars on four of the bears broke away before the bears entered their dens for the winter. These six bears are no longer being tracked.

Thriving in the wild

Five of the remaining bears were visited in their dens in March 2006 to assess their condition and to place fixed-size collars on the females. All of the bears were in great condition, and one of the females even tipped the scales at an amazing 187 pounds! Adult females visited in dens in March usually weigh about 150 pounds.

The good condition and weight of the bears indicated that the forage available in the Book Cliffs in summer 2005 was outstanding, which is what biologists expected with the above-average moisture.

The great condition of the bears also showed that they were able to successfully acclimate and find food in a natural environment. In addition, despite spending several months close to people at the IBBR, there was very little evidence that the released bears were habituated to people, and none of the bears that were tracked over the summer were involved in nuisance situations.

The overall success of this rehabilitation and release provides strong reasons for continuing the bear cub rehabilitation program. In the future, rehabilitated young bears may be used to augment low-density bear populations or even to reestablish bears in areas that have suitable habitat but are currently unoccupied.

As for the surviving bears that were released in June 2005, researchers from BYU will continue to track the female bears for two to three years and will visit them in their winter dens to monitor their health and reproductive capacity.

You can help

The IBBR provides an invaluable service by rehabilitating bear cubs in a way that allows them to successfully acclimate to their natural habitat. The facility operates solely on private donations.

You can contribute to the IBBR by visiting their Web site at www.bearrehab.org. 🐾