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Orphan cub's release shows bear rehab potential

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Orphaned 7-pound cub found after 2006 tornado; rescuers named her Twister
- A year later, healthy 100-pound Twister released into woods in Idaho
- Center: Research shows bears can do well in wild after being raised by people
- China's panda program and other researchers interested in center's success

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TEXT SIZE

ATLANTA, Idaho (AP) -- Jabbed with tranquilizers, her ear pierced with a green ID tag, Twister traded her steel transport box for freedom after a bumpy 90-mile ride into central Idaho's mountains.



Twister, an orphaned black bear, emerges from her cage and heads for the wild last month in Idaho.

The yearling black bear orphan stepped from an open cage onto a dusty truck bed, dropped softly to the ground and disappeared into the woods.

Twister was separated from her mother by a rare mountain tornado in June 2006. Raised at the Idaho Black Bear Rehabilitation Center in a Boise suburb, the 7-pound cub grew to 100 pounds on a diet of formula, apples and dog food. Twelve months after arriving at the center, she was ready for the wild.

"I didn't think she was going to survive," confessed Sally Maughan, founder of the bear rescue operation. "She couldn't stand on her own two legs."

Maughan and John Beecham, a retired state Department of Fish and Game biologist, have saved nearly 150 orphaned black bears from Idaho, Washington, Oregon and Utah since the center opened in 1989.

Today, they field phone calls from bear rehabilitators in Turkey, South Korea and Pakistan seeking advice on how to help their own orphaned and often endangered bears. China, just beginning to return its giant pandas to the wild, is also interested in their work.

The London-based World Society for the Protection of Animals, which helps pay Maughan's \$35,000 annual budget, hopes her work convinces people around the globe that rehabilitating orphaned bears, then releasing them in forests, is better than sending them to zoos or circuses.

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"The general perception is cubs need to learn from their mothers and orphaned cubs will never survive," said Victor Watkins, WSPA's [wildlife](#) director. "We can prove that bear rehab and release can work and can be successful."

For three years, Beecham has tracked 19 orphaned cubs outfitted with radio collars. Even bears like Twister that had to be bottle-fed every two hours have thrived in the wild, he said.

"Bears are solitary creatures. It's a natural process to break away from their caretaker," Beecham said. "We just have to make sure they don't think any person they come across is going to be a source of food."

There are about 20,000 black bears in Idaho alone. Every year, dozens of cubs are orphaned, some when hunters shoot their mothers during biannual hunts. Others are abandoned during droughts that make food scarce. And some, like Twister, fall victim to nature's whims.

Deb Davis, a retired professor from the University of Alaska, lives in the unincorporated central Idaho town of Bear, where a June 4, 2006, tornado leveled about \$9 million worth of timber. She remembers hearing whimpering outside her window two days later but left the bear cub alone, figuring its mother was nearby.

A week later, the cub turned up at a neighbor's home, dehydrated and helpless.

"She fit in my hands. I held her in my lap and I rubbed her paws," Davis said. "I said 'Twister, hang in there.'"

State Fish and Game officials called Maughan, whose bear rehab center has been home to as many as 40

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orphaned cubs at once.

Scientists from the Chengdu Research Base for Giant Panda Breeding in China hope to use Maughan and Beecham's work as a model to help win support for their efforts to return their iconic bears to the mountains in central China. They attended a May workshop organized by Beecham at a bear sanctuary in western Russia.

"The experiences of rehabilitation and reintroduction with other bear species is valuable in planning for the eventual reintroduction of giant pandas," Kati Loeffler, a German veterinarian at Chengdu, said in an e-mail. "The situations in Idaho and in remote areas of Canada are almost ideals that we can use as guidelines."

At Twister's release in the Boise National Forest late last month, she was joined by four other bears as Beecham and observers, including Davis, bid farewell.

Twister quickly trotted off, while the others calmly moseyed from their cages. One climbed a tree and lounged on a low branch. Another sniffed flowers near a photographer, looking for something to eat.

After a week in the forest, however, the bears are more likely to scamper off at the sight of humans, Maughan said. [E-mail to a friend](#) 

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