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Center saves orphaned black bears

Idaho program is gaining worldwide attention for efforts

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

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

Twister was separated from her mother by a freak mountain tornado last June. Raised at the Idaho Black Bear Rehabilitation Center in Boise, the 7-pound weakling grew big on formula, apples and dog food. Twelve months later, she's a 100-pounder ready for the wild.

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

Maughan and John Beecham, a retired Idaho Department of Fish and Game biologist she works with, have saved hundreds of orphaned black bears from Idaho, Utah, Washington and Oregon 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 orphan 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, also hopes her work convinces people around the globe that rehabilitating orphan bears like Twister, then releasing them deep in the forest, is better than jailing them in concrete cells or turning them into a psy's dancing clown.

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 bear 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 orphan bear cubs at once. Though Idaho provides no money for Maughan's operation, Fish and Game officials do transport orphan bears to her facility.

They also assist Beecham with releases, tranquilizing the bears, tagging their ears and outfitting some with radio collars, to assess survival rates. Saving tiny orphan bears makes for great public relations, said Steve Nadeau, Idaho's large carnivore coordinator.

"At a population level, we wouldn't worry about individuals," Nadeau said. "But the public is worried about individuals, so we have to take that into consideration. Humane treatment of wildlife is important."

In May, Beecham organized a workshop at a bear sanctuary in remote western Russia. Scientists from the Chengdu Research Base for Giant Panda Breeding who aim to return their iconic black-and-white bears to the central China mountains attended, and hope to use Maughan's and Beecham's work in Idaho as a model to help win government and popular support for their efforts.

"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, told the AP 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 on July 28, she was joined by four other bears — two females, two males — as Beecham and observers including Davis bid a final goodbye.

Twister trotted quickly off, while others just moseyed from their cages calmly. One climbed a tree, lounging on a low branch. A 170-pound male named Buddy sniffed flowers near a photographer, looking for something to eat.

After a week in the forest, however, they're more likely to crash off into the trees at the sight of humans, said Maughan, who still remembers her first orphan bear, 18 years ago.

"Within a matter of two weeks, that bear had me totally and completely wrapped around its paw," she said.

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Jon Rachael, Idaho Department of Fish and Game regional wildlife manager, prepares Twister for her journey. The orphaned black bear spent a year at the Idaho Black Bear Rehabilitation Center in Boise.

GALLERY (2 PHOTOS)

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After a bumpy 90-mile ride on mountain roads, Twister emerges from her cage for a quick dash to freedom in Atlanta, Idaho. (John Miller, Associated Press/melanie Miller, Associated Press)