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Bear that survived Idaho tornado shot by camper

By JOHN MILLER
The Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho -- A young black bear, orphaned during a freak 2006 mountain tornado, then rehabilitated and released into the wild, was shot and killed by a camper after nosing her way into the wrong tent.

State wildlife officials say wildfires, drought and the failure of this summer's wild berry crop may have driven the bear into closer proximity to humans.

Released in June, the yearling female had been dubbed "Twister" by animal rescuers at the Idaho Black Bear Rehabilitation Center in Boise.

Sally Maughan, who runs the rehabilitation center, acknowledges she grew attached to Twister after taking in the then-7-pound cub teetering on the edge of starvation following the June 2006 tornado. But Maughan has no time to mourn; she's got 45 new black bear orphans this year from California, Idaho, Nevada and Utah.

"She tried so long and so hard to survive, so you'd like to have thought that there was a longer life for her," Maughan said. "But there's nothing we could do differently. She made her decision, and it cost her life. I wish it hadn't happened -- but now I've got 45 other bears to worry about."

Twister was released with four other bears June 23 in the Boise National Forest, part of efforts paid for by the London-based World Society for the Protection of Animals to convince people around the globe that rehabilitating orphaned bears, then releasing them into the wild, is better than sending them to zoos or circuses.

Of some 150 bears rescued by Maughan's center since 1989, only two prior to Twister are known to have become "nuisance bears" and had to be destroyed, she said.

In 2007, however, more and more wildlife including bears, moose and elk have wandered into Idaho's populated areas. Animals are seeking out food amid the hottest temperatures on record, Idaho Department of Fish and Game officials say. Wildfires also have charred 2 million acres in Idaho, according to federal records, forcing wildlife to seek out new territory.

Jon Rachael, Fish and Game's big game manager in southwestern Idaho, said Twister -- outfitted with a radio-tracking collar -- was spotted several times near campgrounds in the weeks following her release. To improve her chances of survival, he recaptured Twister Aug. 19 and relocated her to a more-remote area.

One telltale sign that Twister was struggling was her plummeting weight, Rachael says. At her June 23 release, she tipped the scales at 87 pounds. Two months later, she was just 65 pounds.

Following her relocation, Rachael says he received sporadic reports of the bear loitering near another forest

campground on the north fork of the Boise River. It was chewing on an elk carcass left behind by a hunter during the muzzleloader rifle season. When Rachael visited the campground, Twister rose on her hind legs to investigate him, then ran off.

"That's the way we'd like to see bears behave around people," he said.

On Sept. 20, however, Twister was found dead at the campsite. A man who later contacted the Department of Fish and Game told agents the bear had poked her nose inside a tent at about 2 a.m. He wasn't taking any chances; in a rare attack three months earlier in northern Utah, a black bear killed an 11-year-old boy.

"There were no charges filed or pending -- we considered it a justified take of a nuisance bear," Rachael said. "It was not the way we would have liked it to have ended."

The four other bears released with Twister are also dead, killed in separate instances by hunters since August.

That makes 2007 the first time that an entire crop of Idaho bears raised by Maughan's rehabilitation center hasn't survived a first year of freedom. Fish and Game officials say bear hunters are reporting higher-than-average success rates in the season that ends Oct. 31.

Still, John Beecham, the retired state Department of Fish and Game biologist who works with Maughan to rehabilitate orphan bears, said this year's deaths have caused him to re-evaluate releases during years of extreme drought.

"My preferred strategy is to release them in the wintertime into dens and let them come out in the spring when wild bears do. That gives them the best likelihood of success and survival," Beecham said. "That only works when the bears are in really good physical condition going into the winter. If they come into the rehabilitation center late in the fall, they don't weigh enough at that point in time to put them in a winter den."