

Shoshone (male) & Shenandoah (female) arrived 6/30/93. Both were brown in color and both traumatized by their experiences. They weighed around 30 pounds. They were placed in dens 11/27/93 weighing 80 pounds. I have received many such gifts from both bears & coyotes, have many stories and memories. This is but one of them and the emotion I carry from this gift will always be with me.

Unfortunately, photos from 1993 & some of 1994 were lost or misplaced in moving the new manufactured home onto the property. I hope I'm just overlooking them, but only time will tell and right now time is too short to keep looking & still share this with you.

The Gift

By Sally A. Maughan

The animals I cared for during my years as a wildlife rehabilitator filled my life with wonderful moments. However, any bond I shared with them is tentative. It may last a few days or a few weeks. For my part, it is a bond of caring and understanding. For the bear it's a bond of need that allows the animal to temper it's wild instincts to accept help. It lasts only as long as the need exists. From one day to the next, it can break in the blink of an eye. When it does, I know the animal is recovering and the need for my help is ending.

Although each animal is special, the bears touch me in a way others don't. Their spirit is strong. They are so wonderful in their awareness of being a bear. One bear, one moment in time, one memory touched my life forever in a way that will never happen again. The impact Shoshone had on my life continues each day and his gift priceless.

For five years, I specialized in black bears & coyotes. That July, Fish and Game arrived with two orphaned cubs. Shoshone and Shenandoah did not have a pleasant start in life. They found Shenandoah bawling near the outskirts of a small town. Shoshone, alone and frightened in the top of a tree, was unable to join his sibling nearby. A leash and collar tangled in the branches held him prisoner as he struggled to free himself. Rumor was they escaped from a local man using the cubs to train hounds. No one knew for sure how long they were in captivity or what happened to their mother. Nor would anyone confirm the story so Fish & Game could take action against the man.

The wounds on the cubs were minor compared to the stress and trauma they suffered. Cubs usually adapt to their new surroundings within a few days. Shoshone shook uncontrollably whenever anyone appeared. The shaking was so intense at times he would lose his balance and I was nauseated watching him. I kept everyone else away and stayed on a strict routine each day. Shenandoah seemed to settle into the situation much easier.

Because I am their foster mother, most cubs treat me like a bear. I behave around them as much like a bear as possible, considering my handicap of being human. As a result, their behavior towards me is more like that of bear to bear than bear to human. I expected Shoshone would soon adapt the same way. Weeks passed and nothing changed. He always moved to the far side of the enclosure, watching me constantly, his whole body quivering. Whenever he started to move, I froze in place. This gave him time to get where he wanted to go with as little threat from me as possible. It was stressful for me, knowing even those few moments of my presence caused him such trauma.

July became September. All the cubs were doing fine. Shenandoah adjusted as the others had before him. Shoshone continued to live in constant fear. I was desperate to help him, yet unable to do anything that made a difference. Late in the month, for the first time since his arrival in July, he stopped the uncontrollable shaking. He kept his distance, always staying as far from me as physically possible. In November I began preparing the cubs for hibernation. (We no longer force hibernation - the bears will hibernate or not as their bodies dictate). I slowly tapered off the food supply as was natural in the wild. The weather turned cold and snow made its first appearance. We set the date for placing the bears in the mountain dens. Before we go I stop feeding. The bears are usually lethargic, ready to begin the winter sleep. At this point, they are not interested in food or much of anything that takes energy. Sleep is the driving force.

On the last day of feeding them, I check the wire, clean the enclosure, and make any necessary repairs. After this day, I will not enter the enclosure again until we take them to the dens in the mountains. It will be the last day to spend a quiet moment together. Most everyone has experienced the peacefulness of a fall day in the mountains, the sense of being alone with nature. That's what this last day with the bears is like. They are quiet, sleepy, stillness all around us. An occasional bird sings, but you can feel the heaviness of winter in the air. I sat on one of the logs, looking from bear to bear, remembering the experiences of the past few months. Each bear is special. Each bear brings a smile, a memory that touches my heart. Some are more memorable than others. Rehabilitators learn quickly not to get attached. However, I do worry more about some than others. Shoshone was taking more of me with him than I normally give.

Native Americans say the strength of bear medicine is the power of introspection. If you follow the power of bear medicine, you have the power of knowing. Your goals and dreams can then become realities. My dream at that moment was an impossible one. I offered the bears a safe and secure place to be a bear until it was time for them to take charge of their own life. I wanted Shoshone to experience the carefree play and security the other cubs experienced. I wanted to believe he knew I was not a threat to him. I wanted desperately to know that he understood I was there to help make right the horrible things done to him. As I sat watching the bears, I would often share my thoughts aloud as if believing they understood. I did so on this day, knowing that the words carried no meaning for Shoshone. Despite my closeness with bears, despite all the bear medicine I'd gathered over the years, it was an impossible dream and one I knew would forever remain a dream. My needs were trivial compared to what Shoshone could give - a signal that somehow he understood.

As I stood up to leave, I thanked the bears for sharing a small part of their lives with me. I tried to give them some sense of understanding that soon they would take charge of their destiny again. It would be the last few moments I would have with them. Reaching the middle of the enclosure, I spotted some bear scat I'd missed while cleaning. I bent over, crawling under the logs above me. Shoshone had already started to move, recognizing that I was headed in his direction. I froze in place, waiting for him to reach his destination at the other end of the enclosure. This time, Shoshone had something else in mind. He walked towards me with a purpose and courage I'd never witnessed before. As he approached, I knew something was about to happen. It crossed my mind that he might not have good intentions. People treated him in a way that deserved retaliation. I wouldn't blame him for gathering courage and striking back.

I tucked my head down, thinking I would protect my face. Shoshone wasn't a very big

bear at this time, but the strength in those jaws and the power behind the claws, was beyond any defense I had. With one swat, he could easily open up my head or rip off my face. As tense as the moment became, I remember chuckling as if one option or the other were more desirable. I suppose in the back of my mind was the thought that all I had to do was move. That single action would scare him off. Yet never did I consciously consider it. The reason was simple. After months of trying to ease his fear, I was not going to make any move to scare him, regardless of the consequences to me.

Just a foot away, he stopped and sat down. My hand lay stretched out in front of me, my head tucked, my eyes looking upward into his. I remained totally still, aware that the next few moments would change my life, yet not knowing in what way. Would I be mauled? Would he simply swat and run? Would he do nothing? I didn't know, but I knew there was something highly out of the ordinary going on. After years of working with bears, I've learned the body language and I can read their eyes. I know their moods, understand their thoughts, recognize their intentions, and have come to appreciate the whole range of expressions or moods that bears convey. I saw no anger, no hate, no threat in Shoshone eyes. The tenseness left my body. I raised my head and looked directly into his eyes.

In pure slow motion, Shoshone reached out with his paw and hooked the fingers of my hand with his claws. Still, at that moment, I just hoped to come away with my hand intact. In the most gentle fashion, he brought my hand up to his mouth. He sniffed and touched it with his lips and tongue. He turned it over ever so gently. Then, so slowly, he lowered my hand back down to the ground where he found it. Not once during those few moments did his eyes leave mine. For several seconds more, we looked at each other. At that moment we shared an understanding that words could never have expressed. Then for the first time ever, he turned his back on me and walked slowly away.

This bear, so tormented by humans, so afraid, had gathered his courage. With such gentleness, Shoshone gave me his bear medicine, granting my wish and making my dream a reality. His actions spoke clearer than any words. He not only acknowledged what I had given him, but gave a part of himself to me in return. We shared a few moments in time that will never be repeated with any other bear and never be lost to either of us. Wherever he goes, wherever I go, we carry a piece of each other with us.

When the days are long, when the work too great, when worry sets in, when there is no money to buy bear food, I think of Shoshone. I see him sitting in front of me, his eyes looking straight into mine. I feel his paw on my hand. I sense the trust, the understanding. I know what his fate and the fate of other cubs would be if not for the long hours, the work, the worry. He had a safe place to come when he needed it most. I gave him that. In return at the last possible moment he gave me a gift of trust and understanding rarely given to us humans. I don't dwell on how he knew that was the last possible moment to reach out to me. Thirty seconds more and I would have been gone. I dwell instead on Shoshone's courage, his tremendous ability to reach beyond my human level of understanding. If Native Americans are right, Shoshone gave me the greatest gift of my life when it was most needed. He gave me a gift impossible to expect, impossible to receive. Yet, I have it, I live with it, I remember it each day. His bear medicine is a part of me now and perhaps in some small way, I'm able to share his gift with the other orphaned cubs who pass this way.

Each day as I go about the work of caring for the cubs, I think about Shoshone. I envision him, his paws resting on a log on some mountain, looking out at the valley below. I can almost smell the pine, hear the wind in the trees. I can even feel his sense of belonging. I see him pause for a moment, then slowly, majestically turn and disappear into the woods. He is an adult now. He faces the daily threats just as any other bears. But he is free. He is his own spirit now. For as long it's supposed to be he will live in his world, where being a bear is the greatest gift of all.

Someday when I cross over perhaps I will meet both Shoshone & Shenandoah again.

Sally A. Maughan
Idaho Black Bear Rehab, Inc.

Reprint of this article is not allowed without permission of the author, Sally A. Maughan