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Seven cubs rescued

By Rosa Kasper



Last Tuesday, Patricia Reiche was walking home from the new park at Highland Lakes Beach One with her son Sean, 10, when she heard a commotion. People told her that witnesses had seen a bear trying to break into a house and that Fish and Wildlife officials had shot her. The cubs had followed their mother up the tree trunk as she sought refuge in a tree and were whimpering with fear as their mother lay dead in the branches above them.

Wildlife biologists were trying to dislodge the cubs by shooting them with tranquilizer darts. After the biologists tranquilized each cub, they caught it in a tarpaulin as it tumbled from the tree, Reiche said.

“The Fish and Wildlife biologists were very cool about what they were doing, and they made it an educational thing for the children and others who were watching,” Reiche explained. “They laid the cubs down gently, and then tagged and tattooed them, and took blood samples to make DNA records. They explained that they are using DNA to track bear families in the area. The biologists even allowed people to pet the cubs.

“The babies look so soft and cuddly, but the fur is very coarse,” Reiche added. “It was important for Sean to see and touch these little bears. We live here and we should know about them.”

Shortly afterwards, Tracy Leaver of the Woodlands Wildlife Refuge in Alexandria Township in Hunterdon County opened her arms to the two little cubs. The refuge is the only facility the state has certified to care for orphaned or injured bears, and staff there have cared for hundreds of wild creatures over the 25 years the refuge has been in business. The bears joined the collection of raccoon babies, squirrels, opossums, turtles and one bullfrog already guests at the refuge.

Leaver said she was stunned by what happened next.

By the end of the week, two more bears had been shot in the Highland Lakes area for attempting to break into homes and five more cubs orphaned. With other cubs already being cared for, now the refuge had nine four- to five-month old, still-nursing cubs to foster.

“We count on having one or two cubs a year,” Leaver said. “We don’t have money in our budget to care for nine young bears, but we are always ready to rise to an occasion.”

Funds to run the refuge come from public generosity n there is no state or federal funding. But Leaver said that state wildlife officials have said they would try to find a grant to help raise the bear cubs.

Leaver said that the refuge has a habitat for bears, but with so many to care for, building another, larger enclosure will be critical. And she worries that more bears could arrive before winter starts.

“Everything is going well with the generosity and support so many people have been giving, but as the bears grow, we’ll need the larger cage,” Leaver said.

All the cubs are doing well, but Leaver said she is concerned about one of the last three cubs, which is having a hard time adjusting to drinking formula from a bowl.

The cost to feed the nine cubs now is about \$100 per day because they still are drinking formula, but Leaver expects that cost to double and then triple as the bears are weaned and grow during the year they will live at the refuge. She estimates the cost to build the larger cage at about \$20,000.

Of the 25 bears Leaver has rehabilitated at the refuge, not one has gotten in trouble with the law. Each bear is tagged and collared for easy tracking before being released into the same general area where it had been found. The rehabilitation protocol the refuge staff and volunteers use has been so successful, Leaver said, it has drawn national attention.

“When you can do this right, why do it any other way?” Leaver said.

Considering the deaths of the three mother bears, Leaver said that the bears won’t have died in vain if their deaths help raise public awareness about the measures people should be taking to avoid drawing wild creatures to civilization.

“Some people think they are helping the bears by feeding them, but they are misguidedly killing them with love. Wild animals deserve to be kept wild. Let’s respect their wildness by being sure to control our garbage, remove our bird feeders and bear-proof our commercial dumpsters.”

State biologists say that when mother bears feed near homes, they teach their cubs to follow suite, Leaver explained.

“Wild animals aren’t pets and all of our wild neighbors deserve our respect,” Leaver concluded.

“We exist to give a second chances to animals who have had conflicts with humans, and we are happy to have been on the other end of this situation.”

Those wishing to make a donation should write to Leaver at Woodlands Wildlife Refuge, P.O. Box 5046, Clinton, New Jersey 08809, or visit woodlandsrefuge.org for more information and updates on the bear cubs.