



Orphaned bear cubs become growing problem for refuge

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ALEXANDRIA TWP. | As two others wrestled on the floor, Wicked paced, seeming restless and hungry.

The 5-month-old bear cub climbed up the chain-link fence and paced back and forth in front of the door. Three other cubs lazily looked down at him from their wooden platforms.

Along with those six and another three caged elsewhere, nine bear cubs are now calling the Woodlands Wildlife Refuge home.

Their mothers were shot and killed for disturbing humans, officials said. The cubs are too young to fend for themselves, so the refuge took them in. "This is very unusual since I have been here," said Lila Whitely, part-time wildlife care supervisor. "I have only worked with two other cubs. It's very intense. Their reactions are so different from day to day. It's so intense to watch."

Whitely, 23, of Three Bridges, has volunteered at the refuge since 2003 and became the wildlife care supervisor a little over a year ago. She's responsible for making sure the animals are fed and receive any necessary medical treatments.

The most bear cubs the facility previously had at one time was six. Now with nine, the refuge is definitely feeling the financial pinch.

"We are making a very serious emergency plea for support," said Tracy Leaver, the organization's founder and executive director.

Leaver said the refuge got the first bear cub, Wicked, about two weeks ago after he was spotted walking along the highway in Sussex County. Then the group received two cubs Tuesday, three Thursday and three Friday after their mothers were killed in Sussex County, officials said.

"It was a crazy week," Leaver said.

Leaver said grown bears disturbing humans is unusual. The refuge has released 25 bears since opening in 1986 and none of them has gotten into trouble for bothering people.

"The normal behavior for bears is not to approach people," Leaver said.

But she said this time of year is hard for bears because their usual food sources are scarce and it's getting close to mating season.

"They'll be as resourceful as they can about now," Leaver said.

She said the cubs they have each weigh about 10 to 15 pounds but by the time they are released in a year they will be 100 to 110 pounds.

The cubs will remain at the refuge for about a year to coincide with the time they would naturally be put out on their own, Leaver said.

She said they are careful to not let the bear cubs become too attached to their human keeper but sometimes it's hard to keep the opposite from happening.

"It's very bittersweet," Leaver said, "but we are all completely dedicated to releasing these animals back into the wild."

She said though they don't set out to name the animals, they often acquire names.

"That one is Wicked," Leaver said, pointing to the bear cub pacing and climbing about. "Sometimes it's Wicked-good other times it's Wicked-bad," she said with a smile.

Cost of care is expensive. The refuge will soon need a new caged space large enough to house the nine growing bears. Leaver estimates that will cost upward of \$20,000.

"The long-term plan has become a short-term need," Leaver said.

The refuge cannot devote all its resources to the needs of the bears since it cares for about 600 different animals a year as well as two permanent residents: A Canadian lynx named Lady Jane and a full-grown black bear named Grace.

Lady Jane was found declawed inside a motel room and cannot be released.

Leaver suspects someone attempted to turn her into a pet but found it was impossible.

"Now we use her as part of our educational program to show people what happens when they try to make wild animals pets," Leaver said.

She said people mean well when they try to help wild animals but it just ends up hurting them.

"My hope is that the lives of those three bears that died will stand for something," Leaver said. "I hope every person stops and takes a look at what they're doing."

To donate to the Woodlands Wildlife Refuge call 908-730-8300 or send money to P.O. Box 5046 Clinton, N.J. 08809. For more information, visit woodlandswildlife.org online.

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