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## N.J. Bear Refuge Takes in Orphaned Cubs

Thursday June 28, 2007 8:46 PM

By REBECCA SANTANA

Associated Press Writer

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ALEXANDRIA TOWNSHIP, N.J. (AP) - The nine furry black bear cubs scratching their backs on tree limbs and frolicking in a tub of water may be cute, but their presence at the Woodlands Wildlife Refuge isn't necessarily a cause for joy.

In a state known more for urban sprawl than wildlife, the only center to care for orphaned black bear cubs is housing a record number of cubs, reflecting the state's rebounding black bear population and straining the refuge's resources.

``It's New Jersey, and we're talking about bears!" said Tracy Leaver, 52, who operates the privately-run refuge, which took in eight of the nine bears in less than a week in early June. ``It was crisis mode big-time. It was a mad scramble."

The first bear cub came in a few days before Memorial Day after being found wandering along a highway in north Jersey.

Then, on June 5, Leaver received two cubs, followed by three more on Thursday and another three on Friday.

The three mothers of those eight cubs were all shot by officials after either breaking into or attempting to break into homes in the Vernon area, said Darlene Yuhas, a spokeswoman for the Department of Environmental Protection.

The department allows bears to be killed if their behavior is deemed to be a threat to humans.

Meanwhile, Leaver learned this week that a tenth that was found with a broken leg was on its way.

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The Woodlands Wildlife Refuge usually takes care of one or two cubs a year, and the most they've ever had at one time is six, Leaver said.

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Leaver said caring for the nine cubs is a challenge. Operators had to buy more formula and food (fruit and dog kibble) and than expected, and they had to scramble for a place big enough to hold them all. As a result, some of the cubs were put in an empty fox cage.

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The refuge had been planning in the coming years to build a new bear cage, which would include a pond and more trees and cost at least \$20,000. It now will be needed in the coming weeks.

From the Associated Press

``They'll outgrow the fox cage really fast," Leaver said. ``It is a big strain on our resources. It is not in the budget."



The refuge does not get any state or federal money, and the entire \$150,000 budget comes entirely from donations, Leaver said. The DEP does not intend to give the center any money as it cares for the record number of cubs.

``We absolutely do appreciate the work that Tracy Leaver and other wildlife rehabilitators do but in these difficult times there are no plans to provide funding," Yuhas said.

When the cubs came in, they each weighed about 10-15 pounds, and have quickly grown to 20-25 pounds, Leaver said. By the time they are released into the wild in May, they will be a little over 100 pounds.

Black bears had been all but extinct in New Jersey but have rebounded spectacularly, especially in their primary habitat of northwest New Jersey.

In 2005 and 2003, the state held a bear hunt to thin the bruins' numbers. A third hunt slated for December 2006 was canceled by DEP Commissioner Lisa Jackson, who said the state needed to focus more attention on non-lethal measures to control the amount of bears.

The state has been doing more to educate people on how not to attract bears. This includes keeping garbage safely sealed, removing bird feeders and not feeding the bears.

Leaver said at this time of year, as yearlings are getting kicked out of the den, adult bears are looking for mates and many natural foods such as berries aren't yet abundant, bears are more likely to forage in areas where it's easy to find food. And they quickly learn which neighborhoods are tasty.

She hopes that the death of the three bears in June and the boom in cubs at her center will serve as a reminder to people to not feed bears.

``It's no glory for anyone to say that a bear came up and ate

out of their hand. It's a death sentence for that bear later on down the road," Leaver said.

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On the Net:

Woodlands Wildlife Refuge: <http://www.woodlandswildlife.org/>

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