

LTWC's process for returning bears to the wild



By Cheryl Millham

The two cubs rescued by the BEAR League after the mother was illegally shot and killed in Carnelian Bay were brought to Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care. They came in weighing 13 and 16 pounds, respectively. There, they joined three cubs already at LTWC from Yosemite.

All five cubs became friends fast, chasing each other, playing in their pool, rolling and tumbling and swinging on their two swings.

The cubs were on LTWC's webcam all summer and into December and gave people all over the world enjoyment just being able to watch them play and grow.

This next spring, if we receive any cubs, they will also be on our webcam. Just log on to www.ltwc.org and click on "Bear Cam."

Since the cubs had no mother to teach them how to find food or even what foods to eat, it is up to us to introduce these foods to them. An example of the types of foods we offer them is fish, (whole fish) which was placed in their swimming pool, so they learned that if they wanted fish, they needed to get wet. They learned about honey and honeycomb, carrion (dead animals) and fruits and nuts, which they will find where they are released.

As the bears grew, their volume of food had to increase. When they first arrived, they were all put on bear formula along

with other foods, mostly fruit. By the end of summer, they were eating about 40 pounds of food put into their cage twice a day.

That equates to 16 pounds of food for each cub per day. No wonder they gained 70 to 90 pounds in six months.

The volunteers who feed and clean the cubs are never in the same area with them. There is never any communication with them. The cubs are totally wild and not habituated with humans.

To put the bears into hibernation, we always wait until the wild bears are going under. Then we start pulling back on the quantity of food they receive. We do this slowly. This process takes about two to three weeks. Bears don't go into hibernation when it gets cold. They go into hibernation when there is no food. That is why some of our wild bears don't hibernate, because they can find food in the form of garbage all winter.

About two weeks of cutting back on their food, we put in tree branches along with six to eight bags of pine needles so they can arrange them into a huge nest. When the food is stopped, they have already made their winter den – or nest. Then, it is sleepy time for about two more months, until Fish & Game (or the biologists from Yosemite) can make their plans to come and take the cubs to their release point.

At this time, we have had the bears for more than seven months.

It is a happy day when we send the cubs back home to the wild, which is where they belong. They all learned their lessons well and we have no doubt they will have a great life being free, wild bears.

Cheryl Millham is executive director of Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care.