

Injured cub leaves Tahoe to return home to the wild

By Kathryn Reed

No. 8626 is home.

While still small at 35 pounds, this black bear left Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care at the break of dawn Thursday headed for Soda Lake near San Luis Obispo. This is the area where she was picked up in September and where California Department of Fish and Game officials released her later Thursday.

At Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care animals don't receive names. This is because they are not pets and this is not a zoo. It's a rehab facility for wildlife.



The last bear cub rehabbed this season at Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care was returned to the wild March 29.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

When this bear came in she was without a mom, was wandering around San Luis Obispo, and not eating even though she would scamper up pear and apple trees.

When Kevin Willitts, LTWC's veterinarian, examined her he

found an injury under her chin. An abscess had formed that made her unable to swallow. She was losing weight. Arriving at 16 pounds, she couldn't afford to lose much more.

Every two days Willits would work on her until the sore healed.

He was there when DFG picked her up March 29. He took blood, looked at her chin. No evidence of any injury.

"She's not the same bear," Willits says. And that's a good thing. Now she is a healthy bear ready to live in on her own.

It was a slow road to recovery. It was soft foods to begin with – like oatmeal and applesauce. She eventually graduated to solid foods.

Still, being so small, she was never put in with the five other cubs Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care took in last year. Those animals were returned to the wild earlier this year. But based on this one's size, she was kept longer to put a little bulk on her and to give her a better chance at surviving.

Marc Kenyon, associate wildlife biologist with DFG, said a colleague this week had checked the area out where the bear was to be released.

"The rains we've gotten have really greened up the area," Kenyon said, adding there is plenty of food and water for this youngster.

Normally bears are released into a den while they are hibernating. With bears out and about, a den was not her destination.

To get her into the cage in the back of the pickup she had to be tranquilized. Mixing the Telazol, which comes in powder form, with water, Kenyon puts it in a syringe that is the attached to what looks like a long pole.

She's upstairs in the bobcat cage wondering who these people are.

It takes a few minutes for her to get woozy. When she is too out of it to harm anyone, Willits hands her to LTWC volunteer Barry Trammell. He carries what looks like an oversized stuffed animal to the scale in the garage. (LTWC is operated out of the Millhams' home on the outskirts of South Lake Tahoe.)

A monitor is hooked to her tongue to gauge her heartbeat. All her vitals are taken. Kenyon and his two assistants were to do the same when they reached their destination.

At this stage the bear can still feel, see and hear. She's not totally out. On the table though, her eyes are covered to protect them and not have her become agitated so as to raise her heartbeat.

Kenyon put a tag in her ear – just in case she is caught again they know her history.

Cheryl Millham isn't sad to her go. It's the right thing. And it's what she and husband Tom have been doing for 34 years – rehabbing wild animals.

"They are going on to their next step of life. No animal should be kept in a cage," Cheryl Millham said.

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