

Rescued bobcat being taught to toughen up to survive the wild

By Peter Hecht, Sacramento Bee

Since last summer, when she emerged as an orphaned kitten who affectionately introduced herself to crews battling a major wildfire in Plumas County, Chips the bobcat has been diagnosed with an attitude problem.

She's too nice for a bobcat.

And so, in her second of two rehabilitation assignments, volunteers for a Placerville animal rescue group are working to "wild her up" for her return to nature.

She is getting some tough love in a private pen from retired postal worker Jill Tripoli, 56, a longtime volunteer wildlife trainer for Sierra Wildlife Rescue. She's been introduced to some male rescue mates, Tuffy and Sierra, who have no trouble hissing at humans and revealing their fangs and claws in anger.

"If you have a friendly bobcat in the wild, that's not going to work," said Tripoli, who will give Chips a squirt from a water bottle if she even thinks of buddying up to a human.

But Chips is here, successfully on the mend, for doing just that.

The orphaned bobcat, then a kitten barely 3 or 4 weeks old, emerged from smoldering brush Aug. 25 during the monthlong 75,000-acre Chips Fire in the Plumas National Forest. Fire crews found her lethargic, wandering in circles near a road eight miles from the town of Chester. She warmed to them.

Chips followed the firefighters, in particular a Mad River Ranger District hand crew member, Charles "Tad" Hair.

Every time Hair and the crew would stop, she nuzzled up to his boot, snuggling his chaps. He picked her up. She had second-degree burns on her paws. Her eyes were full of soot and pus.

"Tad just took pity on her," said Nan Powers, another volunteer for Sierra Wildlife Rescue, a Placerville group that helps orphaned or injured animals, from squirrels to coyotes, to recover and return to the wild. "He gathered her up and flushed her eyes out.

"Some girls have all the luck."

John Heil, a Forest Service spokesman, said the bobcat survived "in an area where the fire burned pretty intensely.

"How it survived with the fire passing through is miraculous," he said.

Firefighters conducted a search to see if there was a bobcat mother to be found. After realizing the cub was long abandoned, they took Chips to the rescue shelter of Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care in South Lake Tahoe.

A veterinarian cleaned away burned tissue and treated and wrapped her paws. She got a soft bed and a recovery diet of pulverized mice.

Chips healed up nicely. And on Nov. 1 she was brought to an enclosed pen in Placerville.

She was introduced to Tuffy, a snarly bobcat who got his fractured elbow repaired by a local vet after getting hit by a car in El Dorado County, and to Sierra, who was left by his mother near the Sierra Army Depot, southeast of Susanville, and wasn't about to warm to any human.

So now there's no more cuddling for Chips, no more soft bed.

She's having to chase down her own live mice, and occasionally a rabbit, with Tuffy and Sierra. Only on special days does she get some ready-made roadkill squirrel.

And now she's getting an attitude, hiding under an enclosure when humans approach. But generally, unlike her pen mates, she'll still stick her head out to take a peek.

The three bobcats are due to be released into the wild next spring. Meanwhile, Sierra Wildlife Rescue is seeking donations to pay for the 3 pounds of food a day the animals consume.

People seeking information or interested in contributing to the bobcats may call Sierra Wildlife at (530) 621.4661.