

LTWC returns cubs to the wild

By Lawrence Dechant, KGO-TV

When Cheryl and Tom Millham went to an AM/PM convenience store last summer, they ended up rescuing a couple of bear cubs.

The Millhams responded to a call to rescue the two baby bears from a man who was allegedly trying to poach them for money outside the store. They took the two black bears, which weighed 15 pounds each, to the Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care animal rehabilitation facility, where she's the executive director and he's secretary-treasurer.

"The man claimed the mother bear came and started taking his groceries, so he shot her," Cheryl Millham said. "He said he was going to save their lives by selling the cubs so since we are the only agency in California, we were called to come and rescue the bears before they were illegally sold."

The two baby bears (a male and a female) were rescued more than seven months ago, and are now 90 and 55 pounds respectively. They have just been released back into the wild with a clean bill of health.

She said that the animals, if left to fend for themselves, could not thrive in the forest alone.

"If you were a baby black bear and you were alone, something definitely happened to your mom," Cheryl Millham said. "Either she died of old age or was hunted, and as a baby bear orphan you were killed or put in a zoo."

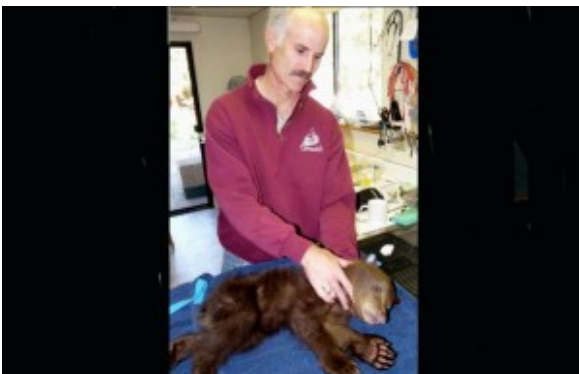
The Millhams have owned Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care for 35 years and rehabilitate more than just bears. This past year, the Millhams have saved 10 bears, six bobcats, hawks, owls, falcons, bats, and river otters, just to name a few.

“It took us four to five years for them to allow us to raise and rehab bears, and we knew it could be done because it was done across the U.S.,” Cheryl Millham said. “In 2000, we finally received a permit for bears, and now we take the baby bears until they reach 50 pounds. ”

She said they usually get the bears during the summer and begin the rehabilitation phase immediately.

During the rehab phase, the bears are placed in fenced areas and are taught to find appropriate foods.

“The local fisherman are good to us and bring us fish all summer long. The fish are given to bears in water; they learn that if they want to fish they have to get their feet wet,” Cheryl Millham said. “We give them acorns as well if they go south, because that is what they’re exposed to in the south. A lot of it depends on where they came from and where they’re going to be released.”



Vet Kevin Willitts in 2012 examines a LTWC bear before it is released. Photo/LTN file

The cages are sectioned into three parts and have a camera in each section so they can monitor the bears. The bears never see humans, because the goal is to get them used to their natural habitat in a safe way.

The cages are cleaned daily. There is an open ceiling, so the bears get used to rain, sunshine and snow.

Cheryl Millham said they also prepare the bears for hibernation during the winter months.

The Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care facility partners with California Department of Fish and Wildlife to release the animals back into the wild. Fish and Wildlife makes the final determination, and will usually release the bears within 50 miles of where they were first found.

“They’re ear tagged and numbered by who they are,” Cheryl Millham said. “They will anesthetize them, draw blood and check their bodies for any illness, and if everything is perfect, they’re given another dose and put in a snow den just like they were sleeping, transported to their location and placed in a make shift den. It is sealed up and they sleep for the rest of the winter. When spring comes, they wake up and don’t seem to have any memory about being around people or being rehabbed. It’s like they have another life, another year.”

The man who is accused of illegally killing the cub’s mother and trying to poach the young bears is facing four misdemeanor charges.

“These animals are not supposed to be in a zoo, they should be able to move freely, frolic freely,” Cheryl Millham said. “Since 2000, we have released all 53 bears we’ve had successfully.”