

LTWC bursting with critters; ready to move

By Kathryn Reed

CAMP RICHARDSON – In the nearly 37 years that Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care has been nursing wild animals back to health, about 24,000 have come through the doors, with approximately 15,000 being able to return to the wild.

The South Shore facility is the only one in California certified to handle first-year bear cubs. They set a record for caring for 13 this year.

“One of the major problems we had this year is we had a lot of different species we couldn’t put together,” Tom Millham, who with his wife, Cheryl, runs LTWC.

It meant being creative with cages and having to release some animals sooner than they liked. But soon these issues will be a thing of the past.

Last week LTWC submitted an application to the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency for a special use permit to move to 27 acres on the corner of Al Tahoe Boulevard and Pioneer Trail. Marjorie Springmeyer owns the land. A lease with an option to buy agreement is in the works.

The cost of the first phase will be about \$5.5 million, with the entire center being close to \$15 million. Some of the money is from Barbara Hartonian, which she left in her will. The rest is from donations – which are always welcomed.



Tom and Cheryl Millham talk Nov. 11 about caring for wildlife and their future plans. Photo/LTN

The Millhams founded the renowned rehabilitation center in 1978. Last week they spoke at the Lake Tahoe Historical Society meeting at Camp Richardson Lodge about their experiences with the various animals as well as their plans to break ground in May on the center in South Lake Tahoe that would be open to the public.

Today LTWC is in the Millhams' back yard. It's too small to let people in other than those working to care for the animals. Plus, the whole goal is to make sure the animals don't get too familiar with people.

It's not easy work to care for wildlife. Baby birds eat 14 hours a day. It's important to keep them fed because by day 25 they are ready to leave the nest.

While there are plenty of people who find coyotes to be a nuisance at best, Cheryl Millham said, "They do have a place."

She added, "We have predators that keep our area clean. It cuts down on disease."

Millham told the story of how a few years ago a dog from out of town came to the basin with distemper. This spread to the raccoon population, which resulted in the death of hundreds of the animals. She said just now the raccoon population is coming back.

Millham said the Mexican freetail bats are misunderstood animals.

“They eat mosquitoes, which are the most disease-carrying insect,” Millham said.

While mountain lions are not common in the Lake Tahoe Basin, LTWC was instrumental a few years ago in capturing one that was wandering around the Tahoe Keys. Once it was tranquilized, veterinarian Kevin Willitts found multiple porcupine quills in her. Some were so deep surgery was necessary. She was released in Hope Valley.

It was Li'l Smokey who was rescued in 2008 from a fire near Redding that led LTWC to get webcams in the various cages. The demand was so great to see pictures of the cub who made national headlines that the Millhams put in the technology.

It wasn't a given the little guy would survive. Millham said his paws were like “burned steak.”

“You could see the fascia. He lost his toenails. You could see the bone,” she said.

Someone asked about the plethora of rabbits that have been seen on the South Shore in the last few years. Mostly it's the mountain cottontail that is here. Cheryl Millham said the mild winters would allow the breed to populate and thrive.

LTWC offers training each May for people to be volunteers. More info is online.