

LTWC returns three bears to Yosemite



Wildlife officials ready the bears for their return to the wild. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

If only these cubs could talk. What would they say about the treatment they received for nearly seven months at Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care? Do they remember their mom being hit by a car last summer in Yosemite?

No more being poked and prodded by needles. That has to be a good thing. But no more watermelon either. They will have to forage for every meal.



Tom Millham with Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care puts ointment in one of the bear's eyes. Photo/Kathryn Reed

While LTWC has 99 percent of all animals' diets be natural, it isn't always what they'd find in the wild. Watermelon and grapes are two things almost all critters like. These bears were fed a lot of fish, but kokanee isn't something they'll find in Yosemite.

For now, the three Yosemite cubs that came in at 8, 8 and 10 pounds are back in the national park. They left the South Shore animal rehab facility last week weighing 62.9, 80.4 and 94.5 pounds.

"They are at a better weight than we had hoped for," Tom Millham told *Lake Tahoe News*. He and his wife, Cheryl, are the founders of LTWC.



The size of the bears' paws have grown substantially since their arrival to Tahoe in July. Photo/Kathryn Reed

On this particular day a bevy of activity is going on. Veterinarian Kevin Willitts is taking blood and performing one last exam on these bruins. Three Yosemite officials are doing what's needed to ensure the bears have a restful ride back to the park. They take hair samples, measurements, weight, make sure that their collars fit just right and that all the paperwork is in order.

Normally only bears weighing more than 100 bears receive GPS collars. This is the only study beyond the one on the East Coast where bears weighing less than that minimum are being tracked. The collars are programmed to come off six months from the day they were put on.



GPS collars will provide national parks officials with data on the bears. Photo/Kathryn Reed

As with all animals brought to LTWC, the goal is to return them to the area they came from. Because the bears are going into a wilderness area, it required teams of men and women on skis to haul the animals to their den on separate sleds. The goal is they will sleep together the rest of the winter and then wake up in their old/new home. For their safety, the exact location is not being disclosed.

The collar will tell researchers if the two males and one female travel the same or different distances, if they stick together, who comes out first and a slew of other data.



South Lake Tahoe vet Kevin Willitts is an integral component to LTWC animals returning to the wild. Photo/Kathryn Reed

A website is expected to be launched in March that will provide information about the bears. It will regularly be updated about their activity. LTWC plans to have a link to it from its website.

Once the collars come off they will be retrieved, refurbished and used again.

These were the last of the five bear cubs brought to LTWC in 2016 to be released. Another bear that arrived earlier this year will stay in Tahoe through the winter.