



A Beary Busy Year

When the phone rang at the wildlife rehabilitation center I volunteered at, the director answered it. "A baby black bear?" she asked, "Of course we'll take it."

That is her usual response when an animal is in need, but on that warm day in September, 2000 she couldn't have known that she had just agreed to take the first of *twenty-three* starving young bears that would be rescued and delivered to her sanctuary for assistance.

American black bears are the most common bear in North America, ranging throughout most of Canada, the United States and into northwestern Mexico. Although typically dark brown or black in color, they can also sport coats of cinnamon, light brown or even blonde tones. Although most people are aware that we have bears in Arizona, they are often surprised to learn that these shy, solitary animals reside relatively close to town.

In a winter cave an average of two cubs are born - less than a pound each, naked and blind, virtually helpless and nursing steadily from mother. By spring, they have grown enough to follow her from the den and begin the lessons of foraging. They are weaned by summer's end, but stay with their mother for at least a full year before they can effectively survive on their own. While grizzly bears vehemently protect their offspring, black bear attacks on humans are rare and usually occur not when the animal is defending young, but when they are startled or have lost their fear of humans.

The first thin, sad baby bear, like many to follow, arrived in desperate need of nourishment and medical care. Due to that year's extreme drought conditions, there was simply not enough food for growing cubs in the wild. Although classified as carnivores, more than three-quarters of a bear's diet is vegetation, including berries, grasses, roots, nuts and flowers. The rest of their diet consists of insects and carrion (dead animal remains) as well as some smaller mammals.

The plant life was dry and small animal populations were decreased, so the hungry babies fell weak and could not keep up with their mothers who were searching for food themselves. Eventually, many became lost, wandering long distances into neighborhoods throughout the state, scrounging around garbage receptacles until they were discovered.

As an overwhelming number of young bears arrived at the facility through fall, more outdoor rehabilitation enclosures had to be built. Volunteers spent endless hours feeding, cleaning and caring for the babies. All of the newcomers were small, pitiful and helpless; most were treated for malnutrition and several for worms or mange.



One tiny bear, weighing only 13 pounds (over forty pounds shy of the expected weight for her age) came in while I was working in the clinic. She was terribly weak, and upon examination we found hundreds of cactus spines riddling her little body. Four of us worked with hemostats and tweezers for over an hour to remove what we could. She was given fluids, antibiotics and painkillers. After several days on a liquid diet, our quiet furry patient finally showed signs of improvement. Once she regained her strength, she was able to move outside and into a small group to play and grow. She enjoyed a rich, hearty diet including a favorite: oatmeal mixed with honey. It was a long road to recovery, but six months later, she was released weighing almost 100 pounds.

In fact, after many months, eighteen of the bears made triumphant returns to the wild. In spring of 2001, state wildlife officials prepared several secluded mountain den sites for fifteen of them. I helped immobilize some of the bears and monitored their recovery during the relocation process. Ten animals were transported via helicopter and five by truck. At many of the stops two bears were placed together, each with a hefty care package of pecans. Later that summer, three more bears were released back on the tribal land they had come from.

For everyone involved, the experience with those baby bears was profound. It was the first time bear rehabilitation had been accomplished in Arizona on such a grand scale, and it was heartwarming to see the community take such a strong interest in the animals' progress and well-being. Additionally, we all gained greater awareness - a better understanding of bears as a species and their role in our state's ecology.

Unfortunately, the drought persists. Dry coniferous forests are facing epidemic bark beetle infestation, and forest fires burn with rampant fervor. The current conditions are not always wildlife friendly and compel those of us who know what hard times can bring to cross our fingers.

Each fall, we wait to see if Mother Nature has delivered enough food to the mouths of young bear cubs, but we know that if she hasn't, there will be plenty of people, ready with open arms, and honeyed oatmeal.