

## The Orphaned Cubs: A True Story

The cub wrapped his arms around my neck and held on as we snowmobiled along a scenic trail near Ely, Minnesota. He looked ahead into the warming April wind, and seemed to enjoy the only snowmobile ride he would ever have. He and his sister had been orphaned a month earlier in the Lower Peninsula of Michigan when hikers discovered their den, actually a surface nest. He and his sister had been born in this nest in January and had spent their first two months there snuggled under their mother. It hadn't taken the hikers long to realize this real mother was not the ferocious mother bear of books and folklore, and they returned day after day to photograph her. They made noises to get her attention. They prodded her with sticks so they could see the cubs nursing under her. She feared humans, and her fear grew as the people grew bolder. Finally, she left.

A Michigan game warden tracked her more than a mile, but the tracks led straight away—with no sign that she would return. By that time, the shivering cubs were within a few hours of dying, so he took them home and kept them warm and fed them from a bottle. The next day, wildlife officials began a search for wild mothers to adopt the cubs and raise them wild and free.

Mothers that have cubs of their own will adopt strange cubs until they leave the den, then they gradually become more discriminating and sometimes even kill strange cubs. The officials were trying to find wild mothers before it was too late—but after a month with no luck, the officials were getting worried. The cubs were getting so attached to people that they might not accept a wild mother. And it was already April. Bears

were leaving their dens. The search for wild mothers expanded to other states.

Wisconsin bear biologist Bruce Kohn knew of a mother, but she was already out of her den. Still, it was the best chance they had, so they flew one of the orphans to him—the male. The mother saw the cub, investigated him, and knew he wasn't hers. She turned and walked away. Kohn picked up the cub, and the search extended to northern Minnesota where bears leave their dens a week later.

My phone rang. I said, "Yes, I have a couple of mothers that might be in their dens. Probably our best bet would be a mother I checked a couple weeks ago. She's 17 years old, weighs 175 pounds, and has two cubs. She's big enough to make milk for an extra cub. If the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources says it's okay, I'll take one of the orphans to her den and see if she'll accept it."

The next day, April 12, the officials flew to Wisconsin and picked up the rejected male and then on to the Ely Airport where I was waiting. They handed him to me. He was at the age when cubs can't get any cuter: blue eyes, nine pounds, and teddy bear fur. No one at the airport could resist petting him. He liked people and liked being held. I wondered if he could go back to being a bear. Within an hour he and I were snowmobiling to the old bear's den which was a surface nest like the one he had been born in.

When I stopped the snowmobile and the sound faded away, he loosened his hold on my neck and climbed higher, standing with his front paws on my head to look around. I balanced him as I turned on the radio receiver and pointed the directional antenna to see if the radio-collared mother was still there. She was. I set the orphan down on the snow, and started toward her through the woods. He tried his best to keep up as I carried the receiver and antenna into the woods. A

couple hundred yards farther the mother's radio beeps grew stronger, and I saw her sitting in her nest behind the upturned roots and trunk of a fallen tree. She was looking back over her shoulder at me and the cub. At ten yards, she glanced nervously away. I stopped and gently picked up the orphan and tossed him halfway to the den.

He plopped in the snow and yelped. The mother leaped up, scrambled over the trunk, and rushed to him. She was making the grunting sounds mothers make when they're concerned about their cubs, but the cub didn't understand. In terror, he lay on his back and fought with all four little feet, yelling at the top of his lungs. She turned away, and the cub scampered back to me. The mother didn't dare follow. She looked at me and walked out of sight. Her two cubs lay quietly in her nest. I carried the orphan over and set him gently in with them. He stood and backed away from them, making the throaty sound bears make when they feel threatened.

I hurried away, hoping the mother would quickly return. Through the trees, I saw the cub leave the nest and climb a tree. I stopped and watched as the mother returned, checked her cubs, and climbed after him, again grunting her concern. He was too afraid to care what she was saying. He blew and chomped his jaws, trying his best to warn her away.

She climbed down and went to her den and disappeared through the trees with her two cubs behind her. It was clear she would have accepted the orphan, but the orphan was so unwilling, I was afraid she was giving up.

The next day I returned with my wife Donna. The orphan was high in a tree, and the mother and two cubs were resting 75 feet away, apparently waiting for him to join them. The mother stood up warily as we approached, and her two cubs started up a tree. When the

orphan saw real people beneath his tree, he came down and climbed my leg. He was scared and probably lonely. It was more than a day since he'd eaten. I walked slowly toward the mother, peeled the cub off my pantleg, and tossed him toward her. He squalled and ran back to me. Then I picked him up and tossed him past the mother. He looked around and screamed. He couldn't get back to me without going past the mother. We hurried away to let him and the mother work out the problem alone.

The next day, the mother stood guard under a tree with three cubs in it. The orphan had finally accepted the mother's offer of warmth, food, and protection. He became a full-fledged member of the wild family. As much as he liked people, no one ever heard of him having anything to do with people again even though natural food was scarce that summer and fall. Berries were so hard to find that his two new brothers were among the many cubs that died that year. In October, he and his mother entered a den and snuggled together for the winter. The next spring, he stayed with her until it was time for her to mate again and she made it clear she wanted to be alone. By then she had taught him all he needed to know to find food, and she continued to give him protection by letting him stay in her familiar territory where other bears dared not stay for long.

I last saw him when he was two-and-a-half-years old, and he was probably about ready to leave his mother's territory and find a home of his own. By that time, I'd given him a set of numbered eartags so he could be identified if he ever were killed in his travels. He was now officially number NC-465. Over ninety percent of black bears are killed by people, so I knew there was a reasonable chance that someday I'd learn the end to his story.

On June 14, 1996, in the last hour of Ontario's spring bear season, NC-465 was killed at the age of seven and a half. Hunter Gerald Harman and his guide James

Malcolm read me the eartag numbers over the telephone and told me the kill location. The bear had moved 73 miles north northeast from his foster mother's territory, which is not an unusual distance for a male to travel before establishing his adult range.

The hunter and guide went on to describe a bear that had nearly lost his life twice before. Somewhere along the way, NC-465 had lost his left front leg at the shoulder--an injury that is often the result of a bullet. The skin was well healed over the shattered bone, and he still had an inch of fat left over from hibernation. The bear was making the best of his situation; but sometime in the last three weeks, he had had another narrow escape. Triangular shaped entry and exit wounds in his chest showed where an archer had aimed too far forward. Mr. Harman killed him cleanly.

Ironically, Mr. Harman was from the Lower Peninsula of Michigan. The thousand mile odyssey of NC-465 would end very near the bear's birthplace.

If you're wondering what happened to his orphaned sister, Gerry, she was adopted by another Ely bear and is still alive, but that's another story.