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FOSTER FAMILIES FOUND FOR DESERTED CUBS

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The nine-pound orphan cub clung tightly to my neck as we sped along scenic snowy trails in the Superior National Forest. He looked ahead into the warming April wind, seeming to enjoy the only snowmobile ride he would ever have. He and his sister had been abandoned a month earlier in Michigan when hikers discovered the den where the cubs were beginning their third month of life under the warmth of their mother.

The hikers and other people had returned day after day to see, photograph, and videotape the wild family. Once people learned the mother was more docile than the mother bears of books and stories, they became bolder. They made noises to get the mother's attention. They prodded her to see the nursing cubs. Finally, their harassment became too much for the mother. She abandoned the den.

A day later a wildlife official tracked the mother for more

than a mile through the early March snow. Her trail continued away with no sign that she would return. The official rescued the cold, hungry cubs. In an effort to save the cubs and return them to the wild, wildlife officials began a widely publicized search for a foster mother.

Black bears that are still in their winter dens will accept strange cubs and raise them as their own, teaching them locations of wild food patches and giving them all the advantages of the mothers' territories. However, after a month of searching, no suitable mother was found in Michigan. Wildlife officials became concerned. The cubs had been away from their mother long enough that they might no longer accept a wild mother, even though human contact was being kept to a minimum.

Finding a wild mother was the only feasible plan because the officials had learned by then that no zoo in the Upper Midwest was prepared to raise the cubs. Time was growing short. Bears were beginning to leave their dens, and mothers outside their dens would soon become more discriminating and might reject or kill strange cubs.

Rejected Cub

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources bear biologist Bruce Kohn found a wild mother that had recently left her den. With no other choices available, Michigan officials flew the female cub to Wisconsin where Kohn released it near the mother. The mother heard the cub, investigated it, but would have nothing to do with it. Kohn retrieved the cub and cared for it while the search was broadened to northeastern Minnesota, where bears emerge from their dens a couple weeks later. Fattened by 1988's abundant crop of hazelnuts, these Minnesota bears were unusually fit for adopting orphans.

A call from Michigan DNR regional wildlife manager Gary Boushelle to Blair Joselyn, Minnesota DNR wildlife population and research manager, cleared the way for the possible adop-

tions. A day later, the cubs were flown to Ely, where wild mothers were being studied as part of the U.S. Forest Service's North Central Forest Experiment Station wildlife habitat project.

The male orphan and I snowmobiled to the den of a 175-pound seventeen-year-old mother that had two cubs of her own. I stopped a hundred yards from the den. The cub loosened his grip on my neck and stepped up on my shoulder, standing with his front paws on my head, to look around.

I set him on the hard-crusted snow and did a sweep with the telemetry antenna to see if the radio-collared mother was still at her den. She was.

The cub followed close behind as I walked to the den. Soon, I saw the den, a surface nest similar to the one the cub had been born in. This nest was in a thickly wooded spruce lowland, next to the dark upturned roots of a windfall. The mother was sitting upright in the nest, sideways to me, watching with an uninterested, lethargic look.

I adjusted my path to avoid frightening the mother bear with a direct approach. Ten yards away, I picked up the cub and gently tossed him halfway to the den. He yelped as he plopped on the snow, and the mother suddenly leaped from the nest, bounded over the windfall, and tried to gather the cub to her, grunting with concern. The terrified cub screamed, turned on his back, and fought her with all four feet. She turned away, and the cub scampered back to me. The mother, scared by my presence, moved off. I put the cub in the nest with the mother's two cubs, but he was afraid of them, too, making the threatening gurgling sounds that adults use when a fight is imminent.

Defensive Huffing

I left but watched through the trees as the cub left the nest and climbed a tree. The mother returned, checked her cubs, and then climbed the tree, again grunting her concern for the cub. The cub huffed and blew and chomped his jaws in fearful, defensive threats. The mother then took her two cubs and led them away.

The next day I returned to find the cub up a different tree, the mother's tracks under the tree, and the mother and her cubs at a tree seventy-five feet away, patiently waiting for the new cub to join them. When the cub saw me, he descended the tree and tried to climb my pant leg.

The cub clearly preferred people to bears, behavior that suggests the third month of life is important to the development of social ties. It is then that most bears leave their dens, and the attachment between mother and cubs becomes all important to the safety of the cubs. Cubs normally view animals outside their family as dangerous. This cub, having lived with people his third month, apparently viewed animals other than people as dangerous.

I pushed the reluctant cub back to the mother. She ran to him. He squalled and ran back to me. I gently tossed him past the mother. He screamed, unable to get to me without going past the solicitous mother. I hurried away before he could get around her.

When I returned the next day, the mother was standing guard under a tree with *three* cubs in it. The tired and hungry cub had finally given in and accepted the mother's offers of warmth, food, and protection.

The orphaned female displayed a similar fear of bears when I tried to present her to a wild four-year-old mother. This mother had earlier learned to accept human presence and was the subject of intense ecological research by biologists at the North Central Forest Experiment Station.

After being pushed toward the mother bear, the cub ran back and climbed the pant leg of Ugo, a visiting Italian who spoke very little English. His look at me was priceless as the mother carefully peeled the clinging cub off his pant leg with her mouth. The cub soon gave up and accepted the strange mother.

Fate of Orphans

Over the next months and years, we will learn whether it is feasi-

ble to return orphaned cubs to wild mothers after the cubs develop an attraction to people. To learn the fate of these two cubs and their families, we plan to visit each family's den next winter. Until then, we will leave the male cub and his new family completely alone but periodically visit the female cub as we continue our study of her mother.

So far, the female cub still likes people. When I visit, she whines to climb my leg and relax on my shoulder or lap. But after a few minutes, she goes back to sniffing and tasting her surroundings, napping, nursing, and watching her new mother forage. However, several times when I've slipped away to leave, the cub has discovered my absence and homed in on the rustling of my footsteps. More than two hundred yards away, I'll suddenly find the cub pattering along in hot pursuit with the anxious mother close behind, calling her back. When the cub stops near me, the mother either picks up the cub or grunts for it to follow, which it eventually does if I stand perfectly still long enough. Sometimes I hand the cub to her and she gently closes her mouth around its head or shoulders and carries it off.

Both foster families live deep in the forest where people seldom go. When a person or other form of danger is heard, both mothers tree their cubs, stand near the tree, and try to identify the danger. Nevertheless, a possibility remains that the friendly cubs might hear people and run to greet them. Not understanding the behavior of the gentle mother who follows, grunting to her cubs, a frightened person might shoot the mother. Black bear mothers rarely defend their cubs against people. The grizzly bear's reputation for defense has carried over to black bears, and black bears at times reinforce that notion with ferocious bluffs.

If the female cub and her mother survive and continue to tolerate people, they can show researchers more about black bear life than could ever be learned otherwise. The detailed information these bears can give now and in years to come can help forest managers maintain proper habitat for black bears and give people a better understanding of all aspects of black bear life.

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