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Orphaned bear cub gets a new chance at life in the wild

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Black bear cubs are usually born in the den in January, emerging in the early spring with their mother. They will remain with her through the following winter before dispersing at about 15 months old.

COUDERSPORT, Pa. — The tremors produced by a bulldozer's scraping thrusts and the thrashing about of skip loaders likely presented a threat she could not tolerate. A mother black bear, startled from the den she had built in a stack of tree tops left from a timber harvest, scurried off into the surrounding forest, leaving behind a cub.

Immediately, the clock started ticking for this lost little bear, whose destiny would be decided in the coming hours. His cries of maternal separation alerted the crew that recently had been clearing a site here in the remote and mountainous north-central part of the state, and they got in touch with Pennsylvania Game Commission wildlife biologists.

With abandoned or orphaned bear cubs, there are limited options, and most of them leave the bear with a different fate than what nature had planned. The cub can be left at the den site in the hope the mother sow might return; it can be euthanized to

avoid a slow death by starvation or predation; it can be sentenced to a life limited by fences and wire while being raised in captivity; or, if the timing is right, the cub can be placed with a surrogate mother and just be a bear.

"Those are our options when we get these cubs," said Mark Ternent, black bear biologist with the commission's Bureau of Wildlife Management. "If we leave them at the site there is a very low survival rate, so that is not really a great option. And nobody likes euthanizing them, and we certainly don't want to put them in captivity for the rest of their lives, so anytime it is possible, we place them with another mother."

Reuniting the cub with its biological mother was tried first.

"It was mild that night, and we knew the cub would be fine, so we left it in the den overnight hoping the sow would come back," Ternent said. "But she didn't, so the next morning we picked up the cub. Older mother bears would tend to come back, but since this was a one-cub litter, we were fairly certain this was a younger mother, and she was gone."

Although now officially abandoned, fortune did smile down on this pint-sized ball of fur. Potter County, the site of the now destroyed bear den, is tucked tight against the New York state line in one of Pennsylvania's least populous regions, between the Allegheny National Forest and the Susquehannock State Forest. This is black bear country and the biologists have a harem of radio-collared females in the greater region. A good candidate for the surrogate role was relatively nearby.

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So Ternent and Potter County game warden Mark Fair fed the hungry 7.6-pound male cub with a syringe in making the two-hour drive south to neighboring Clinton County, where a collared sow still was resting in her winter den with her two cubs.

"He was very fortunate in the timing," Fair said. "We were tagging other bears and going into den sites, so we could reintroduce this little guy with another female."

The collar led them to the den of the sow, already nursing her two young cubs. She was sedated with a dart, and Ternent placed the hungry cub in the den next to his new mom and his now adopted siblings, a female and another male.

"The cub started nursing right away," Ternent said. "Fortunately, bears can't count, so the mother doesn't know how many cubs she has, and we're able to just add this one to her litter."

Pennsylvania, with a black bear population that has grown from around 4,000 in the 1970s to about 20,000 today, has about 65 radio-collared females that are being monitored for their general health, litter size, and the sex ratio in those litters. Black bear sows normally will have cubs every other year, with the cubs usually born in January. The first-year cubs will den that winter with their mother before dispersing the next spring at about 15 months old, when the sow is ready to breed again.

Hibernation for black bears is more a lethargic sleeping state than the deep torpor experienced by other species, so a startled female is alert enough to either defend her den or flee the site.

Ternent said Pennsylvania wildlife biologists usually see less than a dozen cases of orphaned cubs each year, with four so far in 2018. He added an abandoned or orphaned cub's best chance for survival in the wild is when it is placed with a surrogate sow still in her den.

"We've done a lot of these through the years, and the success rate is close to 100 percent when we get them with a mother in the den. They always accept them," he said. "As soon as we put this cub in the den, it rooted around and started nursing."