

Quadruplet Bear Cub Orphans Find a Home

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Jay Barrett/KMXT

When deterrents — including an electric fence — failed to chase off a dump bear in Old Harbor last week, it was shot and killed by authorities, lest it become a further nuisance. When the sow was shot, though, she left behind four orphaned six-month-old cubs.

"Because there weren't any homes in qualified places, we said, 'Well they just need to be euthanized.' And that was Friday that we made that decision," said Alaska Department of Fish and Game Regional Supervisor Larry Van Daele.

He added that cubs this young could not survive on their own.

"Cubs of the year, I mean, like I say, they're like six month old puppies, basically. And they have almost a zero percent chance of making it. In fact, they'd probably be dead by now if it wasn't for the fact most of the other bears in that area are eating salmonberries and a lot of fish are coming up," he said. "And these little guys have actually been going into the dump for protection. And they're finding food in there too. So, they probably couldn't survive, even in the dump on their own, for another couple months or so, but they seem to be doing okay for right now."

But, before they could be euthanized, Van Daele says the four cubs were given a reprieve, thanks to efforts by several groups and individuals.

"Some local folks caught wind of this and they started making phone calls. And one of the phone calls that they made was to Mead Treadwell, our Lieutenant Governor, who took an interest in it, and he made some more phone calls and that's how we got to where we are right now," he said. "So the Lieutenant Governor took a personal interest in this, as did the Old Harbor (Native) Corporation and the village there."

Because of the increased attention, the corporation has chartered a cargo plane to fly the captured cubs from Old Harbor to Anchorage, where the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center will hold them until permits are obtained to ship them to Sweden, which Van Daele said Shell Oil has committed to pay for.

But first the cubs have to be caught. Van Daele says the cubs are too young to shoot with a tranquilizer dart gun, so they will be trying another method for capturing them.

"What we want to do — what's easiest on the cubs and hardest on the people — is to try and catch them by hand. So the fact that they're inside the chain link fence means that we'll try to herd them toward the edge of the fence and throw a salmon net on them. Or maybe use a big dipnet and catch them with that," he said. "Once they're immobilized somewhat with that, someone in our crew will basically grab them. Either tackle them or grab them or whatever and try to stay away from those puppy teeth and puppy claws. And then we will hand-inject them with the tranquilizer

and then put them in a dog crate. So that's the best-laid plans. We'll see what actually happens."

Van Daele says that these four cubs are extremely lucky, because there is not always a home — or deep-pocket benefactors — available to pull off such a rescue attempt.

"This is a very rare occurrence for us to be able to find homes and money for capturing cubs like this. But this is not normality. When there are orphaned cubs, almost always they end up dying, either by being euthanized or being killed by natural circumstances. So one of our concerns is, quite frankly, that if this is a success which we all hope it will be, people will expect us to do this every time there's an orphaned cub, and that's just not a real option."

Van Daele hopes to have the operation done Wednesday morning.