

Department of Natural Resources SCI-MIC Supported Research Projects 2021 Progress Reports

Project Title - Orphaned Cub Program

Project Background - Bear cubs are typically born in January and are fully dependent on their mother until approximately 7 months-of-age. During this time of dependency, cubs sometimes become separated from their mothers and/or their mothers die leaving them orphaned. Sometimes these orphans are found by well-intentioned people and turned over to DNR. Removal of a few cubs annually from Michigan's bear population would have no effect on sustainability of bears, however; it has been repeatedly confirmed that euthanasia of orphaned cubs is not publicly accepted. Orphaned cubs less than approximately 4 to 6 months-of-age can be successfully placed with sows that have their own cubs. For this purpose, DNR maintains 6 to 8 radio-collared adult sows annually so they can serve as surrogate mothers for orphans.

Additionally, surrogate sows are used for training DNR staff in anesthetizing and handling bears, and they are incorporated into educational programs. For example, DNR has made available online curriculum for K-5 on the life history of Michigan bears and some of the information used for developing these materials originated from surrogate sows'. Occasionally, DNR allows stakeholders, reporters and politicians to accompany biologists on winter den checks to replace radio-collars. This is done in an educational setting and provides positive public relations. Lastly, although the number of sows maintained annually is not enough for conducting rigorous research, data from den checks collected over many years provides supplemental information on habitat use and reproduction valuable for monitoring the bear population.

Progress 2021 - In winter 2021, we handled 8 sows in dens in the Lower Peninsula. Eighteen cubs of the year and two yearlings were handled. Due to Departmental restrictions in place at the time, only DNR employees and landowners were allowed to attend den visits in 2021. Unfortunately, one of the collared surrogate sows was later hit and killed by a vehicle on May 15, 2021. One orphaned cub was placed with a sow along with her two natural born cubs in the Spring.

Partners - MDNR and SCI-MIC

Timeline and Budget - This is an annual project funded internally by DNR with contributions from SCI-MIC for purchase of equipment.
