

Department of Natural Resources SCI-MIC Supported Research Projects 2022 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 otherwise healthy orphaned cubs, when other options are available, has low public acceptance. One option that the DNR utilizes, when possible, is placing an orphan cub, less than 4 to 6 months of age, with a surrogate mother. For this purpose, the DNR strives to maintain 8 to 12 radio-collared adult sows, 4 to 6 in each of the Upper and Lower Peninsulas, as potential surrogate mothers for orphans.

There are also several additional benefits of the program. Trapping new bears and conducting den checks for new and collared bears provides important training opportunities for DNR staff on the chemical immobilization and handling of wildlife. Location data collected from surrogate sows outfitted with GPS, and to a limited amount VHF, collars, as well as biological data collected during handling, can be used to estimate home range size, habitat use, reproduction, mortality, and other important information relevant to bear management. Information collected as part of the surrogate sow program has also been incorporated into educational programs, such as an online curriculum developed by the DNR for K-5 students on the life history of Michigan bears. Occasionally, the DNR allows stakeholders, reporters, and politicians to attend den checks, which provides an avenue to communicate accurate, and often positive, messages regarding wildlife management.

Progress 2022 – During the winter of 2022, the DNR conducted den checks on five sows: one in the Upper Peninsula and four in the Lower Peninsula. Den checks were attempted on two other sows in the Lower Peninsula, but warm weather conditions and bear activity levels prevented their completion. Trapping occurred in the Upper Peninsula in spring in an attempt to increase the number of sows available. No female bears were captured, but the two male bears captured provided additional training opportunities for staff. Two orphan cubs were placed with a sow in the Upper Peninsula, and one cub was placed with a sow in the Lower Peninsula. Throughout the year in the Lower Peninsula, one collared sow slipped its collar, and another was harvested during the hunting season.

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.
