

WSU grizzly center's toddlers enjoy an afternoon in the sun

Cardiology professor Lynne Nelson, right, and graduate student Jamie Gehring use a diluted honey solution to train four-month-old grizzly bear cubs Tuesday at the Washington State University Bear Center in Pullman.



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By Shanon Quinn, Daily News staff writer

The slightest hint of a breeze swayed the tops of tall grasses on Washington State University campus Monday, but did nothing to detract from the pleasant weather.

"Willow, Zuri, kids, come on," professor Charlie Robbins called softly to his small charges as a group of researchers began strolling through the enclosed field.

After a final dip and splash in the wading pool, four grizzly bear cubs followed.

At 4 months old, the cubs - rare for being born in captivity at WSU's Bear Center - have grown to about 35 pounds, the size of a medium-sized dog.

Willow, Zuri, Adok and Dodge, born to mothers Cooke and Oakley, are the first cubs born at the habitat for 10 years.

"They're fun to watch," Robbins said. "We don't produce that many. If we want to raise them, we're going to make a lifetime commitment to them."

The center used to donate hand-raised cubs to zoos, but Robbins said the federal Fish and Wildlife Service asked them to stop.

"They have a lot of high profile problem bears in Yellowstone, and they want to save spots in zoos for those," he said. "We could provide cubs for every zoo in the U.S. in short order."

Female bears at the habitat are placed on birth control in their third year, Robbins said.

The four cubs were the result of planned pregnancies, he said.

Robbins said the center keeps about 12 adult bears at a time, limiting two to each enclosure, plus the cubs.

The cubs have spent their time with their surrogate mothers, students Jamie Gehring, Kim Rigano and Joy Erlenbach, since they were about 6 weeks old, Robbins said.

"They've been raising these guys for about two and a half months," he said.

The cubs began exploring the great outdoors about a month ago, Erlenbach said.

"When we first brought them out here they were kind of scared and just sat at the edge and played with the rocks," she said. "They didn't actually come out for a few days. Once they realized it was safe out here, they really enjoyed it. We take them out to the play structure, and they dig and roll around. They especially like to find the most disgusting puddles. There are some holes here that fill with drain water they like to get into."

The cubs seemed to have no fear of the outdoors remaining. They wriggled on their backs in the grass and suddenly would stop their puppy-like gait to press a nose against a stray dandelion flower before racing to keep up with their siblings or start a wrestling match.

But whether made drowsy by too much play or the beating sunshine, two of the cubs, on the warmth of the play structure platform, curled into their human mothers' laps, and began to doze. They brought the soft pads of their paws to their mouths and sucked and purred contentedly.

"Closer to Mom's body is the preferred location," Robbins said, as one cub displaced another on Gehring's lap. "The other ones we had would suck on a pacifier when they were hibernating and want to sit on our laps even when they were about three- and four-hundred pounds."

But as docile as the cubs can be, Robbins said it's important to recognize they won't always be so small.

"We don't want them to bite us or involve us in their games," he said. "We have to think of them as 300 to 400 pound bears and not these little guys."

Bears at the center, although loved by their caretakers, are also the subject of research.

The women are engaged in clicker-training with the cubs, using a small object which makes a metallic clicking sound, when the cubs display what they've learned. For now, that's limited to

sitting when told, but soon they'll be trained to offer their paws so researchers can obtain blood samples.

"Kim and I study fat tissue and how it differs between seasons to learn how they're able to hormonally control that fat in order to survive the winter. Someday we hope to be able to understand the physiological mechanisms behind hibernation," Gehring said.

Robbins, a professor and researcher at the department of Zoology and Natural Resource Sciences at WSU has taught at the college since 1974, and founded the WSU Bear Research, Education, and Conservation Center in 1986.

"I'd worked with other big animals like moose and deer and elk, and I wanted to work with a predator or an omnivore or a different type of animal," he said. "It was just the right idea at the right time. Federal biologists were looking for somebody to help them understand grizzly bear needs and requirements both in captivity and in the wild."

Other studies at the bear center concern nutrition, physiology, ecology, behavior, reproduction, and learning and memory.

As the group prepared for the short stroll back to the center, Robbins glanced down at the cub at his feet.

"They're just very trusting and feel like part of the family," he said.

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