



Saving Li'l Smokey

By: Adam Deem, forester, Northern Region Office

When it comes to wildlife and wildfire it's not like the movies: Sadly, Bambi usually dies.

Fire confuses animals' sense of direction and panic can cause an animal to rush towards, not away, from danger. They don't have the maps or aerial observers to point the way to safety. Nature, as they say, takes its course.

So it was for a 6 month old American black bear cub in the aftermath of the Moon Fire in Shasta County this past summer. The underweight runt wandered in a daze badly dehydrated with third degree burns to all four paws, abandoned by a mother who was unable to tend to his wounds. It was a sad sight, and one that was playing itself out all over our state that summer.

When I first saw the cub and before I observed his injuries, my first thought was to take a few pictures before the mom showed up to rush him to safety. It was only after I got a little closer in my pickup that I noticed he was injured. Inching closer in my truck caused him to clumsily scramble off the road and up into a small tree. When he picked his feet up I could see the raw flesh and

melted paws, it was a miracle he could walk at all.

I can't recall how many seconds it took me to decide that I needed to help him somehow. Despite knowing that this was happening everywhere, I just could not leave that little guy out there to die alone.

Plan A was to call in an expert from the Department of Fish and Game to catch him. This was a sound plan, as long as the bear stayed up in the tree. He didn't, and as he scrambled down the tree and downhill away from me I knew that I had to act quickly or he would be gone forever.

So how do you capture a baby bear? Throwing cookies after him from the safety of the truck as he runs downhill has no effect; he probably thought I was trying to attack him. Imitating the cries of another baby bear worked slightly better, and he actually climbed back towards me several times before deciding that I was no bear. I finally realized I would have to catch him myself. I took a deep breath and stepped out of the vehicle...

Capturing him was easier than I expected it would be. As he ran straight downhill, I took a wide circle through the burned Manzanita, scratching myself as I went. About 100 feet below the road he saw another tree and tried desperately to climb away from me. Once he got about shoulder height, I had to make a quick grab. I took him by the scruff of the neck and pulled him towards me, just like you would pick up a kitten. Well, he was no kitten. At just under 9 pounds he became all claws and teeth, making every effort to bite me and squirm out of my hands. I had no idea such a tiny bear could have so much strength,



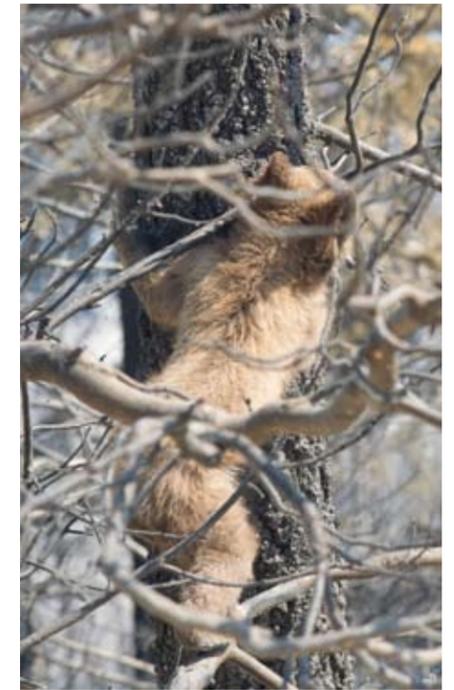
considering how badly he was injured. We worked our way back up to the truck and I got him in the cab, tucked under my arm. Now I called base camp and let them in on the whole situation. We had previously only discussed sending a game warden to help me out. Now I had the bear in hand and we needed to get him where he could be treated.

It was eventually decided that we would take him to base camp where I could hand off this little bear to a Fish and Game Warden. Until then, I had to figure

out how to get him off the line and back to base, which was over an hour and a half away.

I would not recommend backing up a vehicle while holding a wild bear under your arm, it severely complicates the process. Through a series of interesting and harrowing experiences, and with the help of others, we were able to get back to camp. Now wrapped in a towel, provided by a water tender driver, he had calmed down considerably and instead of trying to bite me, he was licking my hands where they had been scratched by the brush. Back at the medical unit, a DMAT team led by CAL FIRE captain Kevin Powell quickly rushed to the aid of the little bear. Public Information Officer Doug Lannon called his vet in Southern California and received recommendations for treating a dehydrated bear with burns, and I held him down as the treatments were administered in short order. It was exactly what you would expect from a group of seasoned professionals.

A short time later a game warden came and we put the little bear into a cat carrier box. I figured that I would probably never see him again. It seemed doubtful at the time, considering how bad he was



injured. Earlier, someone had asked me if I had thought up a name. Several ideas came to mind, but I finally settled on Li'l Smokey, mostly because he looked like a little sausage once we had him wrapped up in a towel. I said goodbye to Li'l Smokey and thought that it would be the last I would hear about that injured little bear. Boy was I wrong.

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below: photographs courtesy of Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care

