

# FWC rescues mother and cub



## from “Bugaboo Fire” near Osceola National Forest

*Article and photographs by Karen Parker*

A sow bear and her cub are doing well after being rescued from the “Bugaboo Fire.”

The FWC responded to reports of an injured bear with a cub in the Osceola National Forest. The bear had been caught up in the fire that raged through the forest in May.

When the bear capture team arrived on private timberland in northeastern Columbia County, the sow was at the base of a tall pine tree. The cub had climbed about 65 feet up the tree.

Three FWC biologists and an FWC veterinarian assessed the situation and decided to sedate the sow and determine how badly she was injured.

Dr. Mark Cunningham, FWC veterinarian, and Jim Garrison, lead biologist at Camp Blanding Wildlife Management Area, approached the sow. She watched them intently but didn’t move.

Cunningham tranquilized the sow with a dart, and after 15 minutes, the bear fell asleep. The bear was loaded onto a stretcher and brought to the road, where Cunningham performed a preliminary examination.

“Her pads are burned and some of the skin is sloughing,” Cunningham said. “Other than being dehydrated, she looks like she’s in pretty good shape.”

The cub, however, presented a different problem.

“Mom probably ‘woofed’ her up the tree, and she was not going to come down anytime soon,” Cunningham said.

The mother bear was brought back into the woods with the hope her cub would come down to join her. After 20 minutes, the cub still hadn’t moved.

Cunningham took the sow to the University of Florida veterinary school for additional examination and treatment. Meanwhile, officers and biologists came up with a plan to get the cub out of the tree – clear the area around the tree and bring in a bucket truck that could reach the cub. FWC employees made calls, and heavy equipment rolled

into the area. A road was dug to the tree and the area around the cub's pine was cleared. During the clearing operation, the cub climbed even higher.

"She picked the tallest tree in this section of forest," Garrison said.

Columbia County Public Works brought in a bucket truck. After a quick lesson on how to operate the controls, Garrison went up. He was 3 feet short of being able to reach the cub.

A dart gun was the next option. After several tries, a dart injected enough drugs into the cub to put her to sleep. She slid down the tree and landed in a tarp FWC officers were holding around the tree's base.



**Above:** The cub sits in the tallest pine tree in the area. **Facing page:** The sow watches from beneath the cub's tree as the FWC capture team arrives.

"She was so light," said Lt. Tim Kiss, training officer. "There really wasn't any weight at all when she was in the tarp."

Elina Garrison, research biologist at the FWC's Gainesville lab, estimated the cub's age at about 3.5 months and determined the cub was a female.

After several days of care at the University of Florida Veterinary Medical Center, the bears were taken to a private rehabilitation facility by FWC officials.

According to Cunningham, the bears will remain in rehabilitation until burns on the sow's paws heal.

"Once her paws are in good shape, we plan to release her and the cub back into the wild," Cunningham said. "It could take about a month for her to heal."

For transit, the bear was placed in a large cage, which was rolled into a horse trailer. The cub was placed in a wooden crate and transported in Cunningham's truck.

The sow created a bit of a stir on the interstate highway. Once she came out from under the sedation, she stood up in the cage and watched traffic.

"We had quite a few people slow down and stare at her while we were driving," said Scott Johns, area biologist at the FWC's Olustee field office. "It was



The sow's back paws show new pink tissue during a bandage change.

like no one had ever seen a bear in a horse trailer before."

When the bears arrived at their new temporary home, mother and cub were reunited.

"This is a great place for them," Cunningham said. "The thing I'm most worried about is contact with humans. Here, the contact will be limited. The sow can heal, and we can get both bears back to the forest where they belong."

The mother bear and cub were released back into the wild June 19. The FWC, Disney's Animal Kingdom and the University of Florida teamed up to return them to the Osceola National Forest. **FW**

"There are a number of people to thank for assistance in this rescue," said Maj. Bruce Hamlin, regional law enforcement commander for the North Central Region. "In addition to all the FWC officers who were on scene all day, we had help from a variety of agencies.

"I'd like to thank Mike Minton and Randy Sherrouse from the Columbia County Fire Department; Paul McCeithon and Wayne Ragans, Columbia County Public Works, who ran the bucket truck; Pat Raulerson from The Forestry Company; and Jack Kennedy and David Lyles, from MA Rigony in Perry, who cleared the area in their skidders," Hamlin said.

"A unique crisis like this almost always calls for unusual partnerships and expertise to reach a timely and successful conclusion. We all worked together to make this happen."

The FWC rescue team carries the sow to the road.

