



CHERYL METZGER

## Finding and tagging bear cubs proves an unforgettable experience

*By Carol Pratt*

The opportunity to hold a Florida black bear cub is a rare experience, but one which my sister, Cheryl Metzger, and I had in March. We accompanied a group of experts from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) and the University of Florida (UF).

We met the group at the Ocala National Forest, home to the largest population of bears in Florida. Scientists estimate that

approximately 900 bears live there. Bears once lived throughout the state, but now are mostly confined to six areas.

Black bears do not really hibernate; they go into partial hibernation or “winter lethargy.” Like the bears in snowy climes, Florida’s black bears go into this state of reduced activity and give birth during winter months, then remain in the den through spring. Bear dens in Florida

aren’t as secluded as their northern cousins’, who most often den in tree hollows. Instead, Florida dens often are nothing more than a slight impression in the soil in a dense thicket.

In spite of female bears’ large size, 125-250 pounds, they can traverse the densest vegetation. Finding the dens is challenging, and getting to them requires climbing up, over and through branches, fallen trees,



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muck and water. Even when a female bear is wearing a radio-tracking device, her den occasionally cannot be found.

While FWC's leader of the group, Walter McCown, and UF researcher, Aletris Neils, go in search of a bear den, the rest of us wait.

Sawing, chopping and crawling through the thicket, they eventually find a den.

Waking up momma-bear requires some finesse. McCown claps his hands in front of the bear's face until she wakes. Unlike what I thought previously, denning females are not overly protective of their young and willingly leave their cubs to save themselves.

As we wait, Neils calls for the assistance of two other FWC bear people, Brian Scheick and Dan Gualitieri. We hear the group yell "Go away bear – go away!" while they repeatedly clap their hands. Then we hear what I can only describe as what sounds like a cat fight.

Within minutes, McCown emerges from the vegetation

with a bear tucked under his arm. In passing, he casually hands the bear over to me – a blue-eyed, black-haired, 7-pound female. Neils emerges with a bear as well, a male.

Apparently, this momma-bear isn't too keen on giving up her cubs – and the cubs aren't too keen on being taken. The mother was reluctant to leave and popped her jaws at the group a couple of times. The cubs scampered up a tree. Scheick had to climb the tree to pull them out (while they wailed) and pass them down to McCown.

The female cub I was holding wanted to escape, but after about five minutes she calmed down and relaxed, placing her paws on my shoulder and clinging to me. I passed her off to my sister and the bear clung to her as well. McCown had said bears are very intelligent. This little bear was clearly taking everything in and processing it, often looking me in the eyes.

The scientists weigh and measure the cubs and insert microchips under their skin for



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After tests and shots, both cubs are returned to where they were found.

future identification. They place radio-collars, specially designed to expand as the cub grows, around the youngsters' necks so their movements for the next six months can be monitored.

After 45 minutes, we had to return the cubs to the den and to a waiting and still-annoyed mother. We had no time to bid them farewell.

I anticipated holding young black bears would be an unforgettable experience, and as I reflect on the occasion, I know I will always remember it. **FW**

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*Carol lived in Naples for 40 years before moving to Tallahassee last October. She moved north to take the position of public relations specialist for the Division of Law Enforcement. While living in Naples, black bears passed through her back yard on several occasions as they vacated developed areas seeking refuge.*



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The author holds the female cub. **Facing page, top:** Neils carries the male cub to the waiting biologists. **Facing page, bottom left to right:** McCown enters the Ocala National Forest to search for a bear den; McCown weighs one of the cubs; Scheick checks the teeth of the female cub while Metzger holds her.