The Wildlife Center OF VIRGINIA



Critter Cam Chat
Special Guests:
Jaime Sajecki
VDGIF Black Bear Project Leader

June 7, 2012

Amanda Nicholson, WCV:
We're VERY excited to have Jaime Sajecki, the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries Black Bear Project Leader, here with us today for this special session on Black Bears. Welcome, Jaime!

Jaime Sajecki:
Hi everyone! I am so glad to see so much interest in bears and glad to be invited here. Everyone at VDGIF is incredibly appreciative for our relationship with WCV and all the care they give to the wildlife in this state and their great educational message. Since there are soooo many questions I am going to try to get to as many as I can. I will be typing really fast and they certainly didn't hire me for my spelling skills…so bear with me (heh). I will start with a few that were submitted in advance.

Jaime Sajecki:
This is to address all of the "about Jaime" questions at once. My parents brought me up to love and appreciate wildlife and nature, I spent most of my childhood in the woods, playing with snakes, poking at dead stuff, raising baby mice and birds, camping all over the US with my parents and sister, I think we camped at just about every National Park in the country and I have the Junior Ranger Badges to prove it!…. Fast Forward: I got my undergrad in general Biology and I loved working with animals however, I also was interested in animal diseases. After I got my BS I went into a PhD program for microbiology and immunology. I hated it and decided working in a lab was going to kill me slowly and painfully so after a few years I quit and in went into the Wildlife Management MS program at Humboldt State working under the wildlife disease professor. He had a project taking place with bears on an Indian Reservation and asked if I was interested…I was and I did and I spent from 2001-2006 working pretty much only with bears for a couple of projects and stayed on with the Tribe after I was done with my MS. Then I came to VDGIF and have been able to continue working with bears since (with a couple months in a different position in the agency). So as a kid I never knew it would be bears specifically but once I started working with them I realized I would never be able to stop. As far as I'm concerned there is no animal that is more interesting or amazing than bears.

Comment:
Would this be normal behavior (the cuddling) for bears if they were siblings from different years? I think I remember reading that bears will stay with their mom for more than a year and sometimes assist with the new babies the following year. Am I remembering that correctly? Thanks and have a great night!

Jaime Sajecki:
Partially correct. Female bears will have a cubs in the winter while in dens, the cubs will stay with their mothers for the next year, den with her, and then 15-17 mo. after they are born (called yearlings at this point), they are told in bear terms to "get lost". The female will breed again after her yearlings have left. Bears only give birth every 2 years so there is no overlap between litters. If a female loses all her cubs early in the first year she will usually breed again that summer. You may be remembering the scenario at the bear center in Ely where the bear cub got lost, the bear bred again and had cubs but the people returned her original cub to her so she had two different age cubs. Somewhat of an orchestrated scenario, wouldn't really happen if there wasn't human intervention. Another point is that sows in the wild will take orphans because they have such great maternal instincts. The other part (about the cuddling), in terms of siblings from separate years doing that…as I mentioned the situation the bears are in is one we "created" for lack of a better term and would not necessarily be a situation that happened in the wild since by the time new cubs are born their older siblings are out of the picture.

Comment:
Jaime - What is the most memorable experience you had while doing your job?

Jaime Sajecki:
That is hard, my job at here has so far been a 6+year memorable experience, but I can say in recent years the thing I am most proud of is when the Wintergreen Community decided to become a Bear Smart Community. They are the first in VA to become a proactive community in terms of coexisting with bears. They have done an amazing job keeping human-bear conflicts to a minimum and should be a model for so many other communities in this state (here is the story about that http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/virginia-wildlife/bearsmart.pdf) .

Comment:
Jaime - Have you had any close calls while performing your duties?

Comment:
Jaime - Have you had anything go wrong while releasing a bear?

Jaime Sajecki:
In terms of with bears…no, I feel more comfortable around bears than I do around people…they are so much more predictable than humans if you know how to interpret their language and postures! Biologists who handle wildlife take all precautions necessary to keep the animal and themselves out of a situation that forces conflict. It is part of the responsibility we have when we decide to get near/interact/handle any wild animal. Of the 500+ bears I

have handled, only one or two made me a little nervous because of their behavior, in human terms they just seemed a little more ornery than the average bear. Sometimes I am a little more ornery than the average human so I can't blame them. The scariest thing I ever caught in a bear trap was a Rottweiler.

Comment:
Jaime - How do you decide where to release a bear?

Jaime Sajecki:
The release site really depends why we have the bear in the first place. The short version is that in some cases we will return bears near to where they came from, in some cases we find a place that is as far away from humans as possible on large tracks of land where there is a good food supply and water nearby.

Comment:
PLEASE HOLD FOR Bear Biologist **Jaime Sajecki:** Our 19 special needs kids [ages 6 to 10] faithfully watch WCV's Critter Cam for all the animals in their care. Our question is about the female bear and the cub she is "fostering": Your recommendation to put the two together ~~ what past and current research/experience do you have that this endeavor might work, and did you expect it to work so famously as it did here at WCV?

Jaime Sajecki:
I wish I could take all the credit but the main person I talk to about captive rearing situations is the ex-curator of the Appalachian Bear Rescue Lisa, who is now Executive Director for Black Bear Solar Institute (check them out, green energy + wildlife rehab! Awesome! http://www.facebook.com/BlackBearSolarInstitute) . There is not a person on this planet that knows more about raising orphan bears in captivity than Lisa. I am proud to call her a friend, and because of her experiences we just knew it had to work. I have had many experiences placing orphans with foster mom bears and know they have incredible maternal instincts and the bear cub we brought to ABR in 2010 was taken in by a yearling female from LA. So with all the info and Lisa's experiences we believed this introduction would be very successful.

Comment:
Jaime - What do you do between bear calls? Do you work with any other wildlife?

Jaime Sajecki:
Is there time between bear calls that I haven't been told about? I have been known to answer a stray question about other wildlife species and try to get out with other projects when I can, but bears keep me very busy. We are just about to put our revised Black Bear Management Plan up on the web for public comment. Dr. McRuer and Dr. Sadar were on the Stakeholder Advisory Committee for this Plan. You can get a good idea about all that goes into the bear program and also make comments on the plan, it will be posted on this site next Monday: http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/comment/

Comment:
Jaime - How young does a bear cub need to be before it can be released on its own?

Jaime Sajecki:
Well, as you know, if all goes as nature planned the cub will stay with its mother until it is 15-17 months old. However in situations where bears are orphaned early, chances of survival have been studied. The factors for the most part in determining when a cub can be on its own and have a good chance of surviving include their ability to eat solid food and be big and agile enough to climb. In most cases of orphaned cubs, general thoughts amongst most bear biologists is that after cubs are about 7-8 months old they have a good chance of making it on their own.

Comment:
Jaime - What is the biggest misconception that the public has about bears?

Jaime Sajecki:
Biggest misconception, Easy one….That bears are going to eat them or their kids or their pets and that they are a dangerous menace to society. For the revised Bear Management Plan we contracted Responsive Management to do a statewide survey of Virginia residents' opinions on black bears and black bear management (seen here if you are interested: http://www.responsivemanagement.com/download/reports/VA_Bear_Survey_Report.pdf) . From the survey, we found that 78% of Virginians know only a little or nothing about black bears. I was depressed about that for a little while but it just reinforces the fact that education about wildlife is CRITICAL to maintaining healthy populations of all wildlife species, especially bears.

Comment:
Do you manage bears for the whole state of Virginia or just around the VWC area?

Jaime Sajecki:
The whole state

Comment:
Amanda, I have a question for Jaime next week. I'm interested to know if they are going to consider putting tracking devices on these 2 bears to research if they stay together and for how long since this type of trial bonding in captivity is not done that often. Thanks!

Jaime Sajecki:
We actually tried that a few years ago with a couple of underweight yearlings the WCV rehabbed with eartag transmitters. The complicating factor is that you can't put an adult size radio collar on bears that small, first the collars weigh too much and second the bears grow so fast that the collars would have to be removed very shortly after they were put on. The smaller collars and ear tag transmitters don't have a powerful signal and as was the case with the two we tagged they disappeared within a month, out of range. It is rather burdensome to the animals to have to wear tracking gear and although it would be great

to be able to see what happens, the benefit to us is much less than the cost to the animal having to wear a bunch of cumbersome electronics.

Comment:
Jaime - Do you ever go back and check on the bears after they are released to see how they are doing?

Jaime Sajecki:
We have done that in certain cases, for instance in 2011 when we brought a bear back that had been at the ABR for a year, or the two yearlings we were able to follow for about a month. In most cases they don't stick around the spot we release them, they are very mobile and travel quite a bit sometimes, so we don't really ever see them in the same spot we put them.

Comment:
Jaime - Is there anything you would like the public to know about encountering bears in the wild?

Jaime Sajecki:
Yes! Be super excited and watch from a distance. Seeing one in the wild is a real treat. Don't ever try to feed it.

Comment:
Jaime - Are you consulted on all bear injuries and/or abandonment?

Jaime Sajecki:
Generally yes… if anyone on our staff knows, I know. We also make sure that our amazing new DGIF vet knows about these issues. The WCV staff also lets me know about anything bear related that comes through them instead of VDGIF.

Comment:
Hi Jaime. Thanks for joining us this afternoon. I'm wondering how far a bear's territory extends. Do bears defend their territory? Or do they somewhat tolerate each other?

Jaime Sajecki:
Bear homeranges can vary from a couple of miles to a 100 square miles. It all depends on how many bears are in the area, what the food source is, where they can find shelter. They have seasonal needs.

Jaime Sajecki:
Male homeranges are much larger than female homeranges and 1 male HR may have multiple females in it.

Jaime Sajecki:
Larger dominant males will certainly mark and defend their territory, especially during breeding season. You can sometimes see territorial markings in the strangest of places like on

telephone poles. They will also break the tops of small trees to show there is a big bear in town.

Comment:
Thanks for being here today, Jamie! We in New England have been watching (some up close and personal!) a black Bear on Cape Cod. The only way it could have gotten there, would be to swim the Cape Cod Canal, which has quite a swift current. Do you think this is possible?

Jaime Sajecki:
Bears are great swimmers so it is quite possible. If you have ever seen a bear foot (like the one in my photo here) you will see they function as awesome paddles. We had one show up on the eastern shore of VA a couple years back.



Comment:
Jaime... are there any other species of bears in the continental US besides black bears and grizzly bears? Are brown bears the same as grizzly bears? Thanks so much.

Jaime Sajecki:
Sorry about the lag here guys, the questions are piling in! I can't keep up!

Jaime Sajecki:
There are black bears and brown bears in the lower US. Grizz bears are a type of brown bear. We only have black bears here in VA.

Comment:
Do you have a theory on why there seem to be so many young, undernourished bears recently?

Jaime Sajecki:
Some black bears are different colors We mostly have black ones in VA but they come in white, cinnamon, blond, brown ... and everything in between. Most of the non-black black bears are further west.

Jaime Sajecki:
Undernourished bears: yes. The condition of bears depends so much on the food availability the year before. Last year was not a great year for acorns so bears did not have much to eat in some places of VA before denning. The amount of calories and fat bears put on in the

summer and fall is critical over the denning period since they are not eating or drinking for about 5-6 months.

Jaime Sajecki:
It is cyclic. We had a lot of bears like these little guys brought into the WVC a couple years ago after another bad mast year.

Comment:
Jaime, is there a known ration between male and female bears. Seems there are far fewer males needed than females. Rather like chickens, one rooster goes a long way, so to speak.

Jaime Sajecki:
Typical ratios of cub litters are 1:1. However there is about a 20% natural cub mortality rate so it may not remain that way. For the most part you bring up a good point. A dominant male in an area will breed with multiple females. We look at female mortality in terms of managing the population; they are the ones that make new bears obviously.

Comment:
Do you have a informative program that you can travel to the different schools and relate all this information to. Seems that would be a good start to educate at an early age too.

Jaime Sajecki:
I do a lot of talks across the state and you are right starting kids off early with the right message makes all the difference. I do mostly adult programs but we have others in the agency that have more kid friendly programs.

Amanda Nicholson, WCV:
(and Jaime is a VERY good teacher ... she has been a speaker at our Call of the Wild conference before)

Jaime Sajecki:
I would like to spend a lot more time on the education but they haven't figured out human cloning yet and there is only 1 me. Our other biologists also do programs across the state as much as they can. When people are educated it makes our work easier.

Comment:
Are there any diseases or environmental pollutants that are particularly problematic within wild black bear populations?

Jaime Sajecki:
Bears are pretty resilient towards diseases. There are pollutants that affect fertility and those are of concern especially in polar bears. In terms of black bears though anything that impacts their main food sources like gypsy moths or other mast tree diseases can have a big impact.

Comment:
Jamie I had a friend tell me something the other day that I find a bit difficult to believe, so was wondering if it holds any merit. He said for bears that are a nuisance (trash cans, etc..) to shoot them with a paint gun. It's somewhat painful but not serious, and because the bear sees the paint still on them they remember the experience longer. Making them less likely to return any time soon.

Jaime Sajecki:
Well first, it is hard for me to label the bear a nuisance; we have to realize that bears are just trying to do what they need. Find easy food sources. Our actions as people really matter in keeping bears from using things we put out as a food source (like trash and birdfeeders). that said...

Jaime Sajecki:
Our main mission is to keep bears wild and keep their natural distrust of humans intact. The worst thing for a bear is to start relying on human placed food sources. So in order to keep bears from becoming habituated after you pick up anything in your yard it is eating sometimes a little aversive conditioning is necessary to keep the bear wild.

Jaime Sajecki:
Paintballs are non lethal and will not penetrate the bears skin. I know it seems "mean" but sometimes the equivalent of a "spanking" is what is necessary to keep bears away from humans...and wild. I completely discourage firing anything at a bear that has the ability to injure them including bb guns or birdshot.

Comment:
Bear Question*for Jaime Sajecki....since the very small bear has been kept by himself, how will this affect him upon his release or will it?

Jaime Sajecki:
I think you are referring to the other small male yearling that came in. Once again with advice from Lisa, we decided to introduce him to the female and cub. They will all be released together if a bond is formed with the male yearling as well.

Jaime Sajecki:
Yearlings at this time of year are on their own for the most part anyhow since the mothers have told them to leave so they can breed again.

Jaime Sajecki:
Sometimes the sibling yearlings will stay together and den together but a lot of them go their separate ways. Males have to travel a ways to get out of their mothers homerange.

Comment:
Amanda, I want to ask Jaime about the place on the little girl bears back. If that is common, does she see any problems in the future with that, or Her LEG???

Jaime Sajecki:
According to the vets at WCV her leg is doing great. Bears are amazing at healing themselves, I have seen some bad injuries in my days and recaptured the bears later to find that they were just fine and all healed up.

Jaime Sajecki:
Also bears all shed their long guard hairs in the summer and sometimes can look a little scraggly for a while. They keep a lot of their crinkly looking underhair that is usually a bit lighter in color. Also being in a captive situation, they sometimes will roll in stuff and get it on them.

Comment:
Jamie, will you be working with WCV, or advising, on the bear facility we hope can be built there for the future? And, how can we, the critter advocate online community, help with that?

Jaime Sajecki:
Yes and yes! I am so excited about this facility. Well obviously the best way to help directly is to donate to WCV BUT other ways you can help bears in general is to get the word about about bears and how people can coexist. Tolerance goes up and negative interactions go down when people are educated. Learn as much as you can about them .. but not from Disney or Animal Planet.

Jaime Sajecki:
Linda Masterson has a great book called Living with Bears: A practical guide to bear country. It is a really good source of information that even kids can read. It is written for general people and not just boring science types.

Comment:
For whatever reason 2 different cubs come together like these two, and they cuddle and snuggle, do you think they will stay together after the release, will the older female want young one to stay with her?

Jaime Sajecki:
That is my hope and it is very possible.

Jaime Sajecki:
As you can see, young bears need interaction with other bears. When we took the two yearlings out of enclosure with the female she (for lack of a better word) seemed a little sad... I hate to put human emotions in the mix but bears interacting with bears at a young age is beneficial on so many levels.

Comment:
Jaime - Will you release these bears from WCV where you released the other 2 bears recently?

Jaime Sajecki:
We haven't made a decision about that yet. We would like to make sure where we put them has a good food supply so we will be evaluating that closer to the time of release.

Comment:
Do cubs have teething issues, like does it hurt, or does he just need to bite on something like straw or a stick? Maybe playing in the blankie is so much fun he just is ecstatic about it all....

Jaime Sajecki:
I am sure they do, although we can't really ask them. They are born without any teeth and they grow their baby set first.

Jaime Sajecki:
Within the year the baby teeth (incisors) go first when they get their adult incisors and then the new canines come out. I am sure that is one of the reasons they like to chew on a lot of stuff.

Jaime Sajecki:
I was told that a mother bear and some cubs recently got into someones pool and the cubs proceeded to pop every last pool toy they had floating in there. I also think they are just like kids and are learning and exploring their new world.

Jaime Sajecki:
Most exploring is best done with the mouth if you are a bear.

Comment:
Hi Jamie! Thanks for your fabulous session today! I've been blessed to see bears in the wild a few times (both here in Maine and in Montana--a grizzly, too, once in Glacier!)---and once a sow with triplets!! Is that very rare?

Jaime Sajecki:
We have had a number of reports in VA of 3, 4, and an occasional 5 cub litter. I would say that depending on the quality of the habitat in terms of food production it is not really that rare. Again not all of the cubs will make it.

Comment:
How does the bear's sense of smell compare to perhaps a police dog trained to follow scent?

Jaime Sajecki:
7-14 times that of a bloodhound. A bear could outsniff any dog on the planet. They also have a specialized scent organ in their mouth.

Comment:
Jaime, the yearling and cub on WCV web cam have been cooped up in this small enclosure for so long will lack of exercise/muscle building have any adverse effect once they are released?

Jaime Sajecki:
I don't believe so but that is one reason why we would like to get them released as soon as the cub is ready. It is not ideal for them to be in there for a really long time but they are very active and the staff at WCV has provided them with a lot of enrichment so I think they will be fine.

Jaime Sajecki:
The only time I have seen one struggle is when we had a couple underweight yearlings in there a couple years ago and the WCV staff fattened him up so good he looked like a little tick. They need that reserve though and will work it off pretty fast.

Jaime Sajecki:
It is much better to get them as fattened up as possible so they have a little more time to find some food for themselves.

Comment:
Jaime the bear biologist question - We are often camping and canoeing in the wilderness here in Canada and although I do love when we see bears they also frighten me, what is the best course of action to take when we come upon bears in the wild?

Jaime Sajecki:
Keep in mind that even though they are bigger than a lot of species they are just as wary of humans as any other. For the most part if you keep your distance they will not bother you and if they see you will take off running. Bears that are used to people are a different story.

Jaime Sajecki:
You can also make a lot of noise and puff yourself up. Don't ever run away from them. I don't know as it is necessary in VA, but in Canada having some bear spray (like Couter Assault) would be good to have with you. Make sure you ALWAYS secure your food.

Comment:
Jaime, It bothers me that this little cub will be set free soon. If he becomes separated from his new big sister, I am afraid he won't make it. What are your thoughts on this.

Jaime Sajecki:
Once cubs are about 7-8 months old they do have the ability to make it on their own. There have been a lot of studies to that effect. Also believe me, neither the staff of WCV or me would ever put a defenseless cub out there if we did not think they had a good chance to make it. I have a lot of faith the two will remain together. He may look small but he is fierce.

Comment:
Question for Jaime - What do you do with a cub who is still nursing and not eating "adult" food yet to keep it from becoming imprinted on humans?

Jaime Sajecki:
That is a good question. Sometimes when cubs are very small you can nurse and have to nurse them by hand however at a certain point in their development early on they can not see or interact with people because they will never go back.

Jaime Sajecki:
The best thing for a little nursing cub is to find it a mother...a bear mother. Short of that places like what WCV hope to build where they can raise these cubs in the absence of human interaction are the only other way to do it.

Jaime Sajecki:
It is one of the reasons we can not let just anyone raise a bear. We want bears in VA to be wild animals for everyone to enjoy. A bear that wants to sit on your lap is not a wild animal and can never be released in the wild.

Comment:
Welcome Jaime - good Paw Avatar! What is the general state of the bear populations in the country?

Jaime Sajecki:
Bear populations across the country are doing really well. A survey across North America was done recently and bear populations seem to be recovering a lot of their traditional range. I love bear feet, so thanks.

Jaime Sajecki:
In the last decade bear management has gone from growing populations to trying to stabilize them in many states. They can live anywhere. There was one just outside of Tucson the other day.

Comment:
Hi Jaime! There is a black bear that swam across the Cape Cod Canal and is now roaming Cape Cod, MA. He has made his all the to the tip of the Cape so authorities are planning on trapping him and moving out to Western MA. What do think of this?

Jaime Sajecki:
The bear biologist in Mass is great, I know her and believe that anything she decided would be in the best interest of the bear.

Jaime Sajecki:
There are some places that are just not a great place for bears especially where there is a lot of urbanization and highways. Highways are really hard on dispersing bears.

Comment:
Jaime, would there be a very different response with the mentoring of the cub if the yearling were a male??

Jaime Sajecki:
That is quite possible and a question that you could always contact Lisa at Black Bear Solar Institute about. From what I know the cub and the male yearling had a good chance of interacting positively but since we had a female at the time it was more ideal of a situation.

Comment:
Thanks so much for being here! I was wondering if you have ever worked with grizzlies? And if so, what is different from your standpoint?

Jaime Sajecki:
No I haven't but a lot of the concepts are the same with brown and black bear species. I have been to Katmai and watched the brown bears feeding on the salmon run and they are amazing but black bears have my heart....

Comment:
Hi Jaime! Are black bears found in all 50 states? Thanks for sharing your time with us today! :o)

Jaime Sajecki:
Not all 50, I believe the last estimate was about 40 states. Thanks for being interested in bears!

Comment:
Hi Jaime -- thanks for being here. How do you interpret the behavior we are seeing. Is the yearling just playing with the cub or is she annoyed with him? he seems to be picking at her.

Jaime Sajecki:
Looks like playing and she may put in his place once in a while if he gets out of hand just like a mother or mentor would. Remember that playing in young animals helps them develop skills they need later on.

Jaime Sajecki:
I am sure she might tire of him a little at times if he is very persistent but she is being great and she is also young and can use that type of interaction. I have seen video of 200 pound bears play fighting like it was a WWF match.

Comment:
Hi Jaime. Did the Native American tribe you worked with revere bears as many tribes do? and if so, did they have a different way of interacting with bears than a regular rural western community might?

Jaime Sajecki:
There is long and short answer to that. The short is that they thought bears were their ancestors and did not hunt them or kill them (unless they tore up their salmon nets or smoke houses). Part of the project I was working on for them was to minimize the number of bears that had to be killed, that was really important to them.

Jaime Sajecki:
Also what I have found between here and the west coast is that people on the west coast have been living with big wildlife for a lot longer than we on the east coast have. They have had bears AND lions. Their reaction to seeing them is a little different than of those here who are experiencing bears for the first time and are not quite sure about them.

Congowings:
I would like to thank you Jaime for spending so much time here today and answering so many questions. It was very informative. Thank you so much!

Jaime Sajecki:
Thanks to everyone who has tuned in here to watch me misspell my way through all your questions, I can be reached by email at jaime.sajecki@dgif.virginia.gov. If you get a chance we would love to have your input on the New Black Bear Management Plan (link above). We also have information and links on our website at http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/bear/.
Thanks to all of you for caring about wildlife and especially my favorite, bears! Remember what you do really makes a difference! THANKS WCV!!!!!