



Posted on Sun, Jun. 28, 2009

UK scientist 'beared' his soul

By Dan Hassert

A year ago last week, University of Kentucky professor and wildlife researcher David Maehr died in a plane crash while tracking Florida's black bear population.

I won't pretend that I knew Maehr well. But during a frigid winter day in the Letcher County mountains, amid the anxiety of a research mission gone awry, I experienced firsthand Maehr's fierce concern for the animals he studied.

It has become a haunting memory.

I was a reporter for the now-closed The Kentucky/Cincinnati Post when I'd first interviewed Maehr for a long article on Kentucky's elk comeback.

Maehr liked the article, and during follow-up conversations invited me to see the critical research he and colleagues were conducting on the health and sustainability of Kentucky's black bear population.

My experience with bears was limited to fresh tracks in the deep Canadian wilderness, so I was enthused.

Wind chills were in the low teens and snow was blowing sideways across the frozen ground the day I accompanied Maehr and others to a den in Letcher County.

The mission: to replace the radio collar on a sow known as F6 and put computer chips under the skin of her new cubs.

The situation was set up against us.

For one thing, F6 was a light "sleeper" (Black bears don't hibernate, technically, but survive the winter in a state of lethargy called "torpor."). Furthermore, her den turned out to be in a deadfall, exposed to the elements.

As Maehr and two colleagues crept up on the den, F6 woke up and bolted. Hit with a tranquilizer dart, she did not go down; the dart either malfunctioned or injected in a fatty deposit. As his colleagues tracked her, Maehr checked on the three tiny cubs. He was worried about their survival, especially when his colleagues returned with no news of their mother. Fearful of chasing F6 too far from her cubs, they'd stopped after walking several ridges.

Maehr had wrapped the tiny cubs in fleece in his backpack, and now he hiked them to the vehicles, where they wound up in the back seat of my Toyota pickup, where my little daughter and son usually sat.

The truck heater blasting, the researchers formed a plan. We'd hike the cubs back to the den, cover them with a shimmery survival blanket and whatever clothes we could scrounge up, and toss in a few chemical hand warmers — anything to keep them warm until their mother returned.

It was unnerving to walk through trees and creekbeds with three cubs squalling, not knowing whether their mother was around.

But all Maehr could think about was the cubs. He looked like he was about to cry.

At the deadfall, he and a colleague worked quickly. The cubs, all male, vocalized their fear and splayed their tiny claws as they were buried in a mound of leaves and donated blankets and jackets. I'd given up a heavy wool vest, full of wildness from many hunting trips.

Then, as we turned to walk away, Maehr stopped. He took off his parka — it was a heavy one, expensive no doubt with its Gore-Tex, fleece and intricate camo pattern — and he gently laid it on top of the squirming pile.

It was an act of love. The cubs were his, and he was imploring them to live.

Driving in my truck, Maehr and I had a tense discussion. Though anxious primarily about the cubs, he was worried about the public's perception of his career and of bear research, although he had done nothing wrong.

I told Maehr that journalistic integrity and personal honesty would require me to write what had happened, but that I was sensitive to the potential impact of the story.

Early the next morning, Maehr called, ecstatic. A colleague in a plane had tracked F6's signal back to the den site, and swooping in close he could see a black blob in the deadfall, the fleece blanket that had been underneath the cubs thrown to the side.

Mother bear had come back in time, uncovered her cubs and stayed. The cubs were alive. The plan had worked.

My article ran a few days later, with a truthful account of a failed field trip. It was picked up by newspapers across the nation, and a condensed version ran on ESPN.com.

We talked several times in the next months: F6 had been spotted, with three half-grown cubs. The DNA "address book" of Kentucky's bears was expanding with each check of a hair snare. Maehr was writing a book. He sent me the introduction for feedback.

Things seemed promising in his world. But then tragedy struck.

I read the testimonials of his colleagues in shock and sadness. A family had lost a husband and father. Science had lost a star. Wild animals had lost a protector.

I realize I knew David Maehr only a little.

But for a moment in the Letcher County mountains, in a face filled with anxiety for three vulnerable cubs he felt were within his care, I'm sure I saw a bit of his soul.

About the author Dan Hassert of Covington is the senior speechwriter for Gov. Steve Beshear.

© 2009 Kentucky.com and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.kentucky.com>