

The Plight of the Bat

By Kaytee Steinkerchner

Cute and cuddly might not be the words used when one thinks of bats, but helpful and helpless should be. Bats are desperately important as consumers of insects, including agricultural and human pests. An average bat will consume two pounds of insects in a single night, and if you think about how tiny a mosquito is, that's a lot of those little blood suckers! With the past five years, bats have been helpless to defend themselves against the deadly white-nose syndrome (WNS). Since this fungus was discovered on bats hibernating in a mine in New York State, over one million bats have succumbed to it. It has been found in the US from Maine down to North Carolina and west to Indiana, Kentucky, and Tennessee. It has also been found in five Canadian provinces. Identifiable by a white substance on the nose and wings of hibernating bats, this fungus causes the bats to arouse from their slumber, only to burn all fat reserves. Hungry, active bats find no insects during winter, causing them to die of starvation. With no known cure, bats that hibernate in large groups in caves or mines, which are our most numerous species, are declining at alarming rates. We find this issue very important here at Parker River NWR and especially at our sister refuge, Great Bay NWR in Newington, NH. Yearly since 2008, we will catch bats in mistnets down by Hellcat for two to three nights in August. Lots of bats migrate through the refuge at this time of year. By catching them, we collect information on why bats are using the refuge.

We can compare the data between years to see if the species composition is changing, and if the numbers of bats are changing. This is also done twice a year at Great Bay. Once in July to determine which bats are using the refuge for breeding and again in August to determine who's migrating through. Along with the mistnetting, we use special microphones and tape recorders to record the calls of bats, which we use to identify the species that are present.



Taking a simple stand back and watch approach is not our style. Instead, we're working on transforming the old weapon storage bunkers at Great Bay NWR (once part of Pease Air Force Base) into fungus free hibernating areas. Although we are still early on in the process, and there's no guarantee that bats will use them, it's worth the effort to save these fascinating and important creatures.

How You Can Help:

- Build and install a bat house to provide a place for surviving bats to raise their young.
<http://www.batconservation.org>
- Don't kill bats that get into your attic. Call a professional who will safely remove it. Or let them stay.
- Stay out of caves used by hibernating bats. The spread of WNS has been accelerated by humans going from cave to cave. If you do go to a cave, sterilize your clothing and gear.
<http://www.caves.org/WNS/WNS%20Decon%20for%20Cavers%2001.25.11.pdf>



Parker River National Wildlife Refuge
6 Plum Island Turnpike
Newburyport, MA 01950
Phone: (978) 465-5753
Web: <http://www.fws.gov/northeast/parkerriver/>