

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 2, 2010

OPINION: Tell the feds to go to bat for all bats

Among mammals — and, let's be honest, among all other creatures great and small — bats have something of a public relations problem. It doesn't help that they like to sleep in caves and come out at dusk in great squeaking waves, flapping their leathery wings as they head off in every direction into the vast night sky. Dozens of Hollywood horror movies depicting them as bloodthirsty miniature vampires reinforce the point: Bats are loathsome creatures.

Except that they're not. In fact, they're among our best friends.

They eat mosquitoes, moths, beetles and other insect pests in quantities hard to imagine. But here are a few stats that might suggest just how important bats are in helping to control pests that damage crops or annoy us:

- One little brown bat (one of the most common bats in North America) can eat 600 mosquitoes in just one hour.
- A red bat eats 100 moths a night, thereby preventing egg-laying that would produce thousands of caterpillars that can wreak havoc in a farmer's fields.
- One small colony of 150 bats can eat up to 33 million crop pests in a single summer.

Unfortunately, bats in the northeastern United States are having a hard time. In less than four years since its discovery near

Albany, N.Y., a disease epidemic called "white-nose syndrome" has killed more than a million bats in the Northeast.

According to the Center for Biological Diversity, the bat-killing disease has spread to 14 states, from New Hampshire to Oklahoma, as well as the Canadian provinces of Quebec and Ontario.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service notes that more than half the bat species living in the United States rely on hibernation for winter survival and are potentially susceptible to the deadly white-nose syndrome as a result. Four of those species are considered to be endangered.

The Center for Biological Diversity adds that some bat populations in eastern states have declined by as much as 80 to 100 percent.

There's no dispute that the sudden decimation of bat populations in the Northeast is a big, big problem. If the disease continues to spread westward, as many scientists fear, entire species of insect-eating bats could be wiped out ... thereby enabling populations of insect pests to explode

Where the federal government and the center diverge is over what steps should be taken, and how quickly, to protect the remaining healthy bats and improve their chances of surviving this devastating epidemic.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is seeking public comment on its

plan to work with states and tribes nationwide to protect the bats. But the center complains the plan is still only in draft form and lacks specific actions to curtail this fast-moving disease.

"It's frightening to watch the government's slow-motion response to what biologists call one of the worst wildlife declines in American history," says Mollie Matteson, conservation advocate for the center. "In moving too slowly and failing to include concrete action, this plan keeps bats on the path to extinction, and we'll all be poorer for it."

As citizens, we can help bats by encouraging the federal government to adopt quickly a comprehensive strategy responding to the white-nose syndrome epidemic. Among the recommendations of the Center for Biological Diversity that seem worthy of consideration: Immediately declare the syndrome a "wildlife emergency," dedicate at least \$10 million for research in next year's Department of Interior budget, and restrict human access to all bat-occupied caves on federal lands.

Comments can be submitted by e-mail to WhiteNoseBats@fws.gov, or by mail to WNS national coordinator, New York field office, 3817 Luker Road, Cortland, N.Y., 13045-9348.

Wonder what our lives might be like without bats? Think: "More mosquitoes."