THE BOSTON GLOBE
MONDAY, APRIL 28, 2008

On a freefall toward extinction

By Mollie Matteson

BATS have been dying by the thousands recently in the Northeastern United States. No one knows why, and it may be months, perhaps years, before the cause is determined.

Meanwhile, scientists predict that this summer there will be a population explosion of insects, which bats normally eat in large quantities. Greater numbers of beetles and moths could mean severe and costly losses for farmers and timber producers. There could also be bigger swarms of mosquitoes and other biting bugs, which will mean more discomfort for all of us.

The perplexing bat affliction is called white-nose syndrome. Bat biologists have called it the "gravest threat to bats ever known." Whether its cause is eventually found to be a toxic substance in the environment, a newly emergent infectious disease, lack of food, or something else, it's clear that this latest blow to bats — and it is only the latest in a long list of injuries — could bring about the regional disappearance of one or more species. We may even lose certain species altogether.

The plight of the bats signals an unhealthy, deteriorating environment — one that we all share. Though biologists don't believe the white-nose syndrome is a contagion that directly threatens people, from a broader perspective we all ought to worry when the natural balance of things has been so altered that bats are dying out before our eyes.

We live in an era when the words "endangered" and "extinct" have become sadly commonplace. Nonetheless, the sudden, wholesale death of wintering colonies of bats has captured headlines nationwide, and shaken biologists used to dealing with species on the downward slope.

One of the species affected is the Indiana bat, which is on the federal endangered species list. While it is estimated to have once numbered in the millions throughout its range in eastern North America, its global population was estimated last year at approximately 500,000. The reasons for its decline are disturbance and destruction of its wintering sites (caves and abandoned mines), loss of summer habitat (forests), and, probably, the use of pesticides and other toxic substances.

Most people probably assume that the habitat of a species listed under the Endangered Species Act is strongly protected. Unfortunately, it's rare that the federal government makes the needs of species like the Indiana bat its top priority when considering projects such as a timber sale, a pipeline, or a new highway.

Part of the problem is that other constituencies, such as timber companies, highway contractors, and politicians, have louder voices and better access to decision makers than bats and other critters. Another problem is that one timber sale or one new highway interchange can rarely be shown, in and of itself, to be an imminent threat to the survival of a species. Collectively, forest clearing, development, roads, poisonous agro-chemicals, and other ills are killing off our bats, but it is death by a thousand cuts.

When a catastrophic illness such as white-nose syndrome hits an already-vulnerable species, it is very likely to be the final blow. The recent bat die-off has attracted headlines, but Indiana bats and other bat species in the eastern United States have been in trouble for a long time. With the specter of white-nose syndrome looming, bat species at risk cannot afford any more losses to any other cause.

In the interest of these fascinating and ecologically vital animals, as well as for our own sake, people must take action now to stem further losses in bat populations. The Center for Biological Diversity has put the federal government on notice that unless it starts considering the impacts of white-nose syndrome on endangered bat species in its proposals for timber sales, road construction, and other projects on federal lands, it will sue to ensure that this analysis is done.

The center wants to stop the bats' freefall to extinction. Without immediate action by the federal government, which is responsible for protecting endangered species, there may be no stopping the Indiana bat, and perhaps other bat species, from disappearing.

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