

Bats Underground



Dangling from a rope 70 feet down a 75-foot mine shaft, Jason Corbett very carefully examined a tangled mass of timbers, rocks and steel just beneath him. But the debris had so many nooks and crannies he couldn't reach a confident conclusion about the absence of snakes. Besides bats, the animals he most often encounters in abandoned mines are snakes – especially the rattlesnakes that thrive in Arizona. Satisfied that his landing zone was clear, Corbett dropped the final few feet to the ground – and was immediately greeted by the ominous buzzing of a rattlesnake.

In the five-foot-square mine shaft, he very carefully ventured one small, backward step and noticed the snake tumble off a board after he had inadvertently disturbed it. The rattlesnake rocketed for a corner, coiled up and rattled indignantly for the rest of his time in the mine.

So goes a typical day in the field for Jason Corbett, Coordinator of BCI's Southwest Subterranean Program.

Since the program began in January, he has spent a substantial amount of time underground, helping federal, state and local agencies conduct bat surveys in abandoned mines throughout the southwestern United States. He's been working with a growing number of partners to identify and conserve critical mines and caves that house colonies of endangered lesser long-nosed bats and other species. The goal is to work on a regional scale, protecting specific underground habitats that are especially vital to maintaining healthy bat populations across the Southwest, but with an initial emphasis on Arizona, with an estimated 100,000 abandoned mines.

In Arizona, BCI's emphasis on dealing deal strategically with bats-and-mines issues centers on the Arizona Abandoned Mine Consortium. BCI recently initiated this new alliance of federal, state and local agencies so partners can pool and share resources, span jurisdictional boundaries and prioritize needs for dealing with abandoned mines in a statewide context. The Consortium already is making notable progress toward its goals and developing a map of priority landscapes where we will focus our efforts.

The American Southwest is a huge, rugged region of spectacular vistas and a great diversity of bats and other wildlife that have adapted to life in this semiarid land. In its first year, Southwest Subterranean has built a solid foundation of partnerships and research from which to face the many challenges ahead.

BCI Members can read Jason Corbett's full story about the new Southwest Subterranean Program's innovative bat conservation efforts.

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