



Trident leaf-nosed bats in an Israeli bunker

“What do you do with a bunch of abandoned army outposts?” asks the Haaretz newspaper of Israel. And the answer is: “Turn them into nature reserves for bats, of course. Or at least, that’s what will happen if the Israel Nature and Parks Authority gets its way.”

Reporter Zafrir Rinat writes that displaced bats of at least 12 species, about a third of the species found in Israel, have found homes in dozens of abandoned military sites in the Jordan River Valley, and the Authority is trying to convince the government to turn them into nature reserves.

Parks Authority ecologist Noam Leader recently presented the plan, noting that some of the facilities, which were abandoned after Israel signed a peace treaty with Jordan in 1994, now house hundreds, even thousands, of bats. There appears to be no opposition, the newspaper says, but no decision has been made.

The Jordan Valley bats had roosted in natural caves, Haaretz reports, but were forced to seek new homes when shepherds began using the caves.

The bats typically roost in old bunkers and bomb shelters. Eran Levin and Eran Amichai, both of Tel Aviv University, surveyed many of the bunkers several years ago and found bats using about 20 of them. They found then that the structures were far from ideal roosts, with metal ceilings and walls that bats could not easily cling to.

Levin and Amichai used a Global Grassroots Conservation Fund grant from Bat Conservation International in 2009 to convert at least eight of the bunkers into near-ideal bat roosts by covering slick surfaces with more bat-friendly materials. The effort was a dramatic success, with many more bats moving into the bunkers almost immediately.

Haaretz notes that the current proposal to turn several outposts into nature reserves would let the Parks Authority “control activities that could harm the bats, like tourism or the use of agricultural pesticides.”

The newspaper says the bats provide biological pest control and reduce the need for pesticides by consuming insects that attack agricultural crops grown by Jordan Valley farmers from Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority.

Levin and Amichai have been studying the outposts’ bat population “and improving the bunker roosts” for the last four years, with support from the Parks Authority, the newspaper says. Among the 12 species confirmed in their most recent survey are *Blasius* horseshoe bat and the greater horseshoe bat, “for which the Jordan Valley lies at the very edge of their known habitat, which means they are more vulnerable to even small disruptions.”

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