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News & Notes

Lending a Helping Hand

When Timothy Clancy read a Boston Globe article about how White-nose Syndrome was killing countless bats, he decided that “bats need my help.” So he went to work building bat houses and designing a bumper sticker to raise money for BCI’s WNS Emergency Response Fund. Pretty impressive, right? Now consider that Tim is 12 years old.



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The Rehoboth, Massachusetts, youngster said he wanted desperately to help scientists solve the puzzle of this mysterious ailment that has devastated bat-hibernation sites in the northeastern United States. But what can a kid do?

Well, Tim found plans for a bat house on BCI’s website and spent the summer building 20 of them. He sold 19, raising about \$400 after the cost of materials. The remaining bat house he donated to the nearby Capron Zoo.

Next, he designed a bumper sticker to help inform the public about WNS and “sold them to the people who did not want bat houses but wanted to support my cause. These sold especially well at numerous summer parties for people who wanted to make small donations. I made over \$100 selling the bumper stickers after the cost of printing.”

That added up to Tim’s \$500 donation to the BCI fund that provides emergency support for scientists seeking the causes and possible solutions to WNS.

But that wasn’t enough for Tim. He also made 60 bat-holding bags for the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department to secure bats that are captured for WNS research. “Each bag was handcrafted from bed sheets,” he says.

Finally, came what Tim calls “the best part of this project.”

He wondered if BCI could help him visit a local university that was doing “actual research” on bats. We called Tom Kunz of Boston University, a leading bat researcher and BCI Science Advisor who is studying WNS. Kunz arranged for Tim to accompany graduate student Jonathan Reichard on an expedition to a bat colony.

“We visited a known hibernaculum, a cave where bats hibernate, in Vermont. We measured body conditions of the little brown bat. Despite the 45-minute hike up the mountain, it was still fantastic. It was exhilarating to gain firsthand experience in the research which I helped support.”

Fighting WNS

As research into the cause and possible solutions to White-nose Syndrome continues, it is largely guided by the priorities established in June by an emergency science meeting that drew more than 100 participants from government agencies, universities and organizations in the United States and Canada.

The final report of the meeting may be downloaded at BCI's website, www.batcon.org. WNS is believed to have killed hundreds of thousands of hibernating bats of at least five species in the northeastern United States during the past two winters. Mortality rates exceeding 90 percent have been reported in some hibernation caves, yet the cause is not known.

Top-priority research questions from the meeting include: "Is the [recently identified] cold-loving fungus associated with WNS the primary cause of mortality in these bats? Is the fungus associated with WNS a secondary manifestation of other underlying conditions? Why are fat reserves of bats with WNS depleted by mid-winter? Are pathogens a direct cause of mortality? Are [environmental] contaminants a direct cause of mortality? How does WNS affect bat maternity colonies?"

The meeting was organized by Bat Conservation International, Boston University, Cornell University, the New York Department of Environmental Conservation and the U.S. Geological Survey, in collaboration with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. BCI provided primary funding, with support from the Disney Rapid Response Fund, the National Speleological Society, Anton Schindler (in memory of his wife Valerie), the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Geological Survey.

As always, BCI members and friends have responded. Our WNS Emergency Response Fund has been able to provide six grants for quick support of critical WNS research at Boston, Bucknell, Cornell, Indiana State and Missouri State universities. Donors include Horizon Wind Energy, the Dirk and Charlene Kabcenell Foundation, Wallace Global Fund and many others.

But, as North American bats face probably their worst threat ever, the need for research support is still great. Your help is urgently needed. Please donate now to the WNS Emergency Response Fund: www.batcon.org/wnsdonate.

Digital Bat Education

BCI Science Officer Barbara French and Executive Assistant Dianne Odegard took bat conservation on the digital road with a series of videoconference presentations, complete with live bats, that fascinated children at a half-dozen Central Texas elementary schools. Better yet, videos of the bat talks will be available for use by teachers across the state.

This educational project was sponsored and organized by the Texas Wildlife Association as part of its Conservation Legacy program. Its slogan: "One generation plants the trees, the next enjoys the shade."

The presentation introduced the wondrous diversity of bats, with a focus on Texas species, for kids in grades 2 to 4, who watched and questioned from their own classrooms. Addressing a video camera but watching the children on a television screen, French showed previous BATS magazine covers to illustrate the many differences among bat species.

Then, to the students' obvious delight, she displayed four live bats, including a Mexican free-tailed bat (*Tadarida brasiliensis*) like those that live beneath Austin's Congress Avenue Bridge. She also presented Zoe, a 15-year-old straw-colored fruit bat (*Eidolon helvum*) from Africa, a charming veteran of countless public appearances as one of BCI's Bat Ambassadors.

“The kids,” she said, “were totally fascinated and, of course, amazed by the bats.” Once she had their attention, French explained bats’ ecological and economic importance and what we can all do to conserve these magical flying mammals.

Odegard said the students asked plenty of questions, ranging from “Are bats teeth sharp?” (You bet) to “How high do bats fly?” (Some fly up to 10,000 feet in the sky).

The Texas Wildlife Association plans to make the video available to teachers online and will provide background information, including sources of more information, such as BCI’s website, in its newsletter, Critter Connections.

Scholarship Deadline Looms

Time is running out to apply for a 2009 BCI Student Research Scholarship. The deadline for submitting applications is December 15, 2008, so don’t delay. Apply online at www.batcon.org/scholarships.

Bat Conservation International’s scholarship program has been supporting conservation-relevant student research projects throughout the United States and around the world since 1990. We have helped more than 250 students conduct important research in 54 countries.

We plan to award 15 to 20 scholarships of \$2,500 to \$5,000 each for the coming academic year. Up to 10 of the scholarships are supported by the U.S. Forest Service International Programs specifically for research conducted in developing countries.

USFS International Programs and BCI are also offering graduate students the opportunity to double their award (up to \$10,000) if they focus their research on subjects of special concern to bat conservation. This year’s Special Scholarships are restricted to research on bats’ pollination of durian or Old World mangroves.

Anecdotal observations suggest that both are highly reliant on bats for pollination. The durian is the most commercially valued fruit in much of Southeast Asia and nearby Pacific Islands, but farmers often mistakenly assume that bats reduce (rather than enhance) durian production. Coastal mangroves are ecologically essential but are disappearing at alarming rates. Their primary bat pollinators are also disappearing rapidly but are largely ignored in mangrove-conservation planning. Studies documenting bat roles as durian and mangrove pollinators are urgently needed. To apply, click “Yes” when asked in your online application if you qualify for a Special Scholarship.

BCI scholarships are competitive, and proposals will be evaluated by an international panel of bat experts.

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