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Bidding for Bats

A Tense Auction Buys Protection for a Critical Tennessee Cave

Jim Kennedy

Time had all but run out for the bats of Wolf River Cave when the alarm sounded at BCI last July. The cave was going on the auction block in less than two weeks and the key bidder was planning to commercialize the cave, harvest the surrounding timber, and develop the area. Tennessee's second-largest hibernation colony of endangered Indiana myotis (*Myotis sodalis*) would likely perish. But in a remarkable cooperative coup, three conservation groups - Bat Conservation International, The Nature Conservancy of Tennessee, and the Southeastern Cave Conservancy - managed in a few days to come up with \$74,000 to enter the auction. It took every dime, but the cave and 33 acres of surrounding countryside near Jamestown, Tennessee, are now safe.

Wolf River Cave, filled with dramatic rock formations, is more than eight miles long. A "wet cave," it acts as a conduit that carries a stream of water runoff from a huge surface area into an underground aquifer. Cutting the timber over the cave could drastically alter its environment.

Indiana myotis are notoriously picky about their hibernation sites. BCI research shows that these bats need hibernation caves and mines that meet precise temperature requirements and that are structured in such a way that the roost stays cold enough for the bats to hibernate in the fall without freezing in the winter. Relatively few caves or mines meet these criteria, and human incursions often alter conditions and leave the roosts unusable.

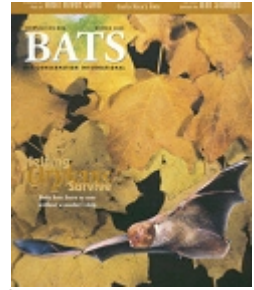
Wolf River Cave is the winter hibernation home for some 2,500 Indiana myotis, as well as smaller numbers of endangered gray myotis (*Myotis grisescens*) and Rafinesque's big-eared bats (*Corynorhinus rafinesquii*). The cave also includes important archaeological and paleontological features, including ancient human footprints and the bones of long-extinct jaguars.

But the cave's entrance is conspicuously large and visible from a nearby road. The need for protection became especially clear two years ago, when cavers found the remains of about 40 bats that obviously had been intentionally knocked off the walls and killed. BCI helped finance installation of a bat-friendly gate on the cave later that summer.

The problem seemed solved until the heirs who owned the 474-acre farm that includes the cave decided to put the property up for auction. The farm was divided into 28 parcels for the sale.

That's when Roy Powers, the world's premier cave gater, BCI workshop instructor, and engineering professor at Mountain Empire Community College in Virginia, entered the picture. Powers called BCI with an urgent warning: Wolf River Cave was being auctioned off July 20 and commercialization was likely unless conservationists intervened.

We immediately called The Nature Conservancy's Tennessee Chapter, which had been working for five years to protect the cave. Director of Protection Gabrielle Call said TNC



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was aware of the sale and the risk to the cave but could offer only about \$31,000 - not nearly enough.

Next we contacted the Southeastern Cave Conservancy, Inc., where Acquisitions Chairman Mark Wolinsky said the group, after an emergency board meeting, was ready to add \$33,000 to the fund. BCI pledged \$10,000 in case the bidding went higher still. The BCI pledge was covered by longtime members Chuck Pease and Cynthia Vann.

The complex financial arrangements, along with agreements on purchasing and managing the critical cave, were completed within three days and the partnership signed up for the auction, which began on an ominous note - the first bid was \$50,000 and climbed quickly.

The would-be developer eventually pushed the bidding to \$73,000, which the partnership topped with a bid of \$74,000 - all the money we had to spend. It was enough and Wolf River Cave was saved.

The check was delivered and the sale completed on August 16. SCCi and TNC will jointly manage the cave, with BCI available for advice on bat conservation and research at the site. The cave will be fully protected when the bats are present, from September 1 to May 1, and available to cavers, with some restrictions, the rest of the year.

JIM KENNEDY is BCI's Cave Resources Specialist.

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