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Bat Workshops: Putting Conservation Into Practice

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By Sara McCabe

If the idea of professional training conjures images of monotonous lecturers, pie charts, and stale donuts, you must not be one of the nearly 1,000 people who have been to one of BCI's Bat Conservation and Management Workshops (or "bat camp," as the workshop is known among the initiated). Far from the usual classroom environment, this one-of-a-kind, five-day course lets participants venture into a mysterious world unexplored by 99.9 percent of the people on earth, interspersing field training with lively discussions. Imagine capturing and observing up to 16 species of bats in an evening as they swoop along a quiet stream, or descending into the remote passageways of the world's longest cave labyrinth to find ancient stains revealing where bats once hung in prodigious quantities. Both fun and practical, this unique training is sometimes the decisive factor between a conventional job path and a career dedicated to bat conservation.

Take Rachael Freeman Long, for example. As a longtime BCI member, Long knew she wanted to incorporate bats in her new job as farm advisor for the University of California Cooperative Extension. With local farmers worried about increasing bans on pesticides, she was eager to study how bats can help reduce agricultural pests. When she spotted an ad for BCI's Bat Conservation and Management Workshop, it was clear this would be helpful training for her new role. Unfortunately, funding was an issue. "I had just started the job," she recalls, "and this simply wasn't in the budget."

Thanks in part to a BCI scholarship, Long made it to the workshop. Since then, she has documented many of the kinds of insects bats are eating in the Sacramento Valley and is now studying specific foraging behavior over agricultural land. She has written articles for newspapers and trade journals, given dozens of public presentations, worked with farmers to put up bat houses, and organized a high school program through which students have already built at least 50 bat houses for use on local farm land. "I'd always been interested in bats," Long comments, "but the workshop gave me the background to integrate that interest into my work." We developed the workshop," explains BCI founder Merlin Tuttle, "because state, federal, and private wildlife agencies knew so little about bats that they rarely even thought to include them in land-management planning." Through ten summers of workshops, hundreds of wildlife biologists and policymakers from dozens of state and federal agencies have been trained, as well as park rangers, professors, zookeepers, and lay people from all walks of life and from as far away as England and Malaysia. They come to learn the tools of the trade: mist netting, radiotracking, habitat assessment--everything needed to capture, study, and conserve bats. While mastering these skills, they are also contributing to important research. Data collected on thousands of bats caught and released have provided information on habitat requirements that is vital to conservation progress. For example, collaborating with the U.S. Forest Service in Arizona, BCI has used workshop practice sessions to document the roosting requirements for poorly studied species of bats, and our findings are leading to improved management planning.

Participants also learn strategies for negotiating and resolving conflict, handling the media, and other responsibilities that come with bat conservation. "One of the best aspects," Forest Service biologist Heather Green wrote to BCI, "is the win-win/conflict-resolution philosophy that BCI both talks and demonstrates." Many

participants have echoed this statement and have successfully incorporated BCI's nonconfrontational approach into their work.

Since the beginning, demand for the workshops has exceeded supply. There has never been a year without a waiting list, and courses have been added continually since inception. The selection now includes three sessions in Arizona, two in Pennsylvania, and one in Kentucky. The need is apparent in the remarks on workshop evaluation forms from "graduates" such as Cristi Baldino of the National Park Service. "In my 17 years of working for the federal government," Baldino wrote, "I have all too often attended training that was mediocre at best. The two BCI workshops I have attended are the most intense and productive training courses in my experience."

The bat camp graduates themselves are proof of the power of the unique workshop curriculum. It is inspiring to see how many put their newfound skills to direct use, each for the specific needs of their job or their community. One of the most direct was National Park Service Resource Manager Judy Harris, who didn't even wait to return home to begin her work on behalf of bats. On the drive back from Pennsylvania to New York, Harris stopped to advise managers at both a National Park Service site and a U.S. Forest Service site on concerns about bats in buildings and placement of bat houses.

David Mikesic of the Navajo Natural Heritage Program in Window Rock, Arizona, has returned to the Arizona workshop every year since he first attended in 1995, assisting with nightly field trips as a volunteer instructor. Back in the Navajo Nation, Mikesic takes time to survey bats after his regular work hours. BCI is using Mikesic's data on range maps currently being compiled for all North American species.

After attending the Pennsylvania workshop, U.S. Forest Service biologist Lisa Nutt not only inspired several other district biologists to attend, but also hosted a workshop herself--the Mid-Atlantic Mine Assessment for Bats Workshop in conjunction with BCI's Bats and Mines Program. Through her hands-on work gating mines and caves, Nutt has helped gain protection for many important bat roosts, including two endangered Indiana bat (*Myotis sodalis*) hibernation sites.

Avid caver Judy Fisher of West Virginia has put her workshop training to use as a volunteer assistant on bat research projects with state and federal agencies. She and her husband J.C. have also taken time from running their own company to assist with cave-gating projects and to conduct a multi-year bat study at Maryland's Round Top Mines. In what's left of her spare time, Fisher gives community education programs and has written a series of articles on the bats of West Virginia.

Some individuals have brought a new awareness of bats to professions where bats had not previously been considered. Workshop alumnus Mark Bloschok, an engineer with the Texas Department of Transportation, gives presentations and advice to hundreds of transportation engineers every year about bat habitat in bridges. "Many of them won't listen to a biologist," he explains. "But a structural engineer who is also a bat expert--now that gets their attention!"

Two-time workshop participant Kevin Cherry of Atlanta, Georgia, has used this same kind of insider trust to change attitudes in the pest control industry, where bats have traditionally been viewed as vermin to be poisoned [BATS, Summer 1996]. After seven years of tirelessly promoting humane methods for removing bats from buildings, Cherry says, "I almost never hear of anyone using chemicals on bats anymore. And use of bat houses has risen significantly!"

These motivated members are just a few from a roster of hundreds who remind us of the powerful ripple effect generated by good training: for every person trained, another 10, 40, or 1,000 more will learn about bats and likely go on to educate others as well. Having a wide network of bat-knowledgeable colleagues also reduces some of the workload that comes to BCI. For example, when bats became a nuisance in the Washington State governor's mansion, local workshop graduate Margaret Gaspari worked with BCI and other local bat advocates to help calm the inevitable media frenzy.

Another kind of ripple effect originates from those who finance scholarships to allow others to attend workshops. Workshop graduate Helen Johnson of Salinas, California, has sponsored the training of five naturalists and educators active in local conservation initiatives and plans to sponsor more. Dallas real estate developer Lee Schmitt attended a workshop primarily to learn how to work more effectively with government biologists, but afterwards also became a scholarship sponsor and a BCI trustee.

All of us at BCI take great pride in the growing accomplishments of workshop graduates. Good training should have an impact on one's life, and nowhere is that kind of impact more evident than in the reports we receive from these colleagues. If you'd like to step up to the next level of active bat conservation, we hope you will join us at one of our 1999 workshops. Or consider helping a friend or a fellow bat enthusiast go to a workshop. You can't believe how many lives can be changed, both human and bat.

Sara McCabe is Editor of *BATS*. She regrets that only a few workshop graduates could be featured in this article but reminds readers that if you or a friend were left out, she would love to hear more about your bat conservation efforts for a possible *BATS* article or "Members in Action" profile. Write to Sara at the address on the inside cover of the magazine.

Now you can join in the daily activities of BCI's Pennsylvania and Mammoth Cave workshops on BCI's web site. Pictures and captions for each day's events this past summer can be found in the "Notes from the Field" journal entries on the BCI web site at www.batcon.org/notes/index.html

HIGHLIGHTED QUOTES (not found in article anywhere)

"The workshop motivated me to mobilize our people to patrol and enforce programs for the conservation of flying foxes."

Melvin Terry Gumal, forester,
Sarawak Forest Department, Malaysia

"The training has enabled me to obtain research fellowships and begin studying the largely unknown northern bat fauna of the Yukon territory."

Brian Slough, consulting
wildlife biologist, Yukon, Canada



Workshop participants help set a harp trap near a cave entrance in Kentucky. When bats hit the vertically strung monofilament lines, they fall directly into the canvas below. This type of trap is highly effective, harmless to bats, and very practical for rapidly handling large numbers of bats.



Participants at the Pennsylvania workshop get to witness the fall swarming behavior of up to 10,000 bats outside a gated, abandoned mine. The mine is one of the few places in Pennsylvania where all six of the state's hibernating species of bats are found, including endangered Indiana bats. The purpose of the swarming is not certain, but probably involves orientation to help young bats find hibernation sites.



Since attending a BCI workshop, park ranger Tom Haraden of the National Park Service has co-hosted a special bat house workshop with BCI and developed several bat house innovations. Here Haraden inspects a bat roost behind a park message board. After noticing that the glass front of the board helped catch the sun's heat, Haraden created a solar-heated bat house for northern climates, which has successfully attracted bats.



Workshop participants visit the attic home of approximately 16,000 bats in a Pennsylvania church. The bats are so accustomed to humans that visitors can observe them at close range, and on occasion we have even watched little brown bats (*Myotis lucifugus*) mating (right). The bats' dawn return to the attic is also a popular field trip.

NOTE: There are two sidebars to this article:

1. Workshop Scholarships: An Investment with Exponential Returns (pg. 5)
2. 1999 Bat Conservation and Management Workshops (pg. 6)

All articles in this issue:

- ▶ [On the Cover](#)
- ▶ [Bat Workshops: Putting Conservation Into Practice](#)
- ▶ [Workshops Scholarships: An Investment with Exponential Returns](#)
- ▶ [1999 Bat Conservation and Management Workshops](#)
- ▶ [Memoirs from Bat Camp](#)
- ▶ [Growing Needs, Expanded Training](#)
- ▶ [Hidden Housing - Artificial Bark for Bats](#)
- ▶ [BCI Highlights](#)
- ▶ [Legal Protection Gained for Bats in Sarawak, Malaysia](#)
- ▶ [Wish List](#)
- ▶ [Thirteen Countries Celebrate European Bat Night](#)
- ▶ [Vacationer's Guide to Bat Watching](#)
- ▶ [1999 Student Scholarships Applications Available](#)
- ▶ [Experience the World's Most Amazing Bats with Merlin Tuttle on BCI Founder's Circle Tours](#)