

Memoirs from Bat Camp

The leader of BCI's workshops shares some personal observations from her nine years at the helm

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By Janet Tyburec

It's 12:48 a.m. I'm sitting in front of my laptop computer opening 11 e-mail messages I've just downloaded, and I've got a stack of the night's bat capture forms with me to process. Most of the workshop participants are asleep, refueling, though I can hear the faint whispers of some still exchanging stories about tonight's bat netting or pontificating about life in general. Some of the local volunteer instructors (respectfully referred to as "bat wranglers") might be awake, too, joining in the camaraderie or perhaps coming to hang out with me in an always-welcome form of solidarity for the round-the-clock assignments that make these workshops run smoothly. Organizing and teaching BCI's five-day Bat Conservation and Management Workshops is one of the biggest responsibilities, yet most enjoyable aspects, of my career. With more than six sessions averaging 14 people each, there is a full year beforehand of correspondence, paperwork, and travel planning. But the participants' overwhelming enthusiasm, every single time, makes it all worthwhile.

It's always interesting to watch the group dynamic change during the five days of a workshop. On the first day, people are usually somewhat reserved, trying to establish their own place in the order of federal and state agency land managers and biologists, scientists, educators, students, and lay people. By the middle of the week, though, everybody relaxes.

The first night netting with a new group is always one of my favorites. It is a special thrill to place a bat in the gloved hand of someone who has never touched one before and watch them shift among the usual range of emotions: fear of letting it go, fear of holding it too tightly, fear of not holding it tightly enough. This is followed closely by amazement at how such a large-looking flying animal can be wrapped up into such a small package when it is in the hand.

By the last night of the course, participants gain the confidence to break up into smaller, more widely dispersed groups to experience different types of netting and trapping. Sometimes at our Arizona site, a small group will go far out into the desert to sample the bats from a more arid environment. Others make the effort to hike all the netting and trapping gear into remote locations not accessible by the field vehicles. This becomes quite challenging on the post-midnight return, when the path is illuminated only by the jittery cone of light spilling from a headlamp. But being out in the wild at night is an experience that many of us don't get to take advantage of during our everyday lives. Crouching quietly by a mist net set over a lazy stream, the forest is alive with sound and movement. A great-horned owl calls down canyon, throwing his voice along the rocky walls. The faint rustling across the stream may be a large insect moving through the leaf-litter, but a quick peek with a dim light reveals a spotted skunk. By remaining absolutely silent, we can actually hear the wingbeats of bats overhead. When we turn our headlamps on the net, and a bat is revealed, the subtle night sounds are overshadowed by our eager scramble to see what we've caught. We're all as excited as kids on Christmas morning, and when our catch is something extraordinary or new (like this year's rare yellow bat [*Lasiurus xanthinus*] in Arizona, Indiana bat [*Myotis sodalis*] in Pennsylvania, and Seminole bat [*Lasiurus seminolus*] in Kentucky), it is as if we just opened the best present of all.

The unexpected turns that both weather and wildlife can take only add to the feelings of anticipation and discovery

each night. Sometimes we sit watching empty nets, while other times we have to pull up stakes in a hurry and slog through downpours as lightning forks across the sky. One year we were stymied by a forest fire which turned our netting sites into a war zone of hot spots, charred trees, and chemical retardants. Another year, our bat wranglers had to chain-saw a path up to a field site when we were unexpectedly confronted with a hurricane-felled tree. But we always learn and often enjoy ourselves in the face of adversity. (Who knew, for example, that a fully fueled chain saw was among the survival gear to be found in a bat wrangler's rig?) Many times the delays and changes in plans allow us to take a break from our sometimes frantic activities and to learn more about each other as people sharing similar interests. From the workshops, people often build lifetime associations and forge important conservation partnerships. We've even been responsible for at least one marriage!

Our daytime activities are no less rewarding. From our escorted tour of off-limits passages at Mammoth Cave National Park to our exclusive admittance into protected caves and mines in Pennsylvania, many of our excursions are once-in-a-lifetime opportunities for participants who have studied these subjects--bats, caves, mines--for years. Most come to the courses ready to take full advantage of every opportunity offered, challenging staff and wranglers to new heights of sleep deprivation in the process. All-night radiotracking sessions are not uncommon at our Arizona workshop, and those who opt for this adventure are additionally rewarded by the stunning silhouette of Cave Creek Canyon backlit by the awesome Milky Way. Add to that a summer solstice sunrise, and we begin to convince ourselves that we can survive quite well on a couple-hour cat nap, just for the potential to catch a rare bat, track a challenging species, or set a new capture record for the night.

We could never present these workshops without the patience of the BCI staff back in Austin handling the daily work of those of us away in the field. Every BCI employee who helps lead workshops has myriad other responsibilities that don't fare well when neglected for weeks at a time. Nor could we afford to offer workshops without the dedicated wranglers--all past workshop graduates--who take time out of their personal and professional lives each year to help keep our instructor-to-student ratio at a comfortable level of roughly 1 to 4. And we cannot forget the generosity of our local, state, and federal agency partners at each venue who help facilitate the accommodations, meals, transportation, and wildlife permits for bat camp each year. When I see how dedicated everyone is to the program, it keeps me from feeling resentful that I spend the bulk of my summer living out of a suitcase in a dorm room (or sometimes even in a tent), far away from the comforts of home.

It's 2:11 a.m. now. The last of the die-hard bat wranglers have finished their projects and drifted off for a short night's sleep before starting all over again. The capture report is up to date, and the gear is loaded back into the vehicles for the next netting session. All my e-mail has been answered and uploaded to the server. Maybe I'll go out for a final check on our radio-tagged bats . . . or maybe I'll just lie down for a nap myself.

*Janet Tyburec is BCI's Education Programs Director.*

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Workshop participants break into small groups for mist-netting, but come together at the end of the night to share what they caught. Here the author displays one of the night's bats so that everyone can identify the species. Other species wait in "bat bags" hanging from a tree branch. Afterwards, all bats are released.



Viewing bats in action through BCI's night-vision scope is a popular late-night workshop activity. At the Arizona site, participants frequently get to see nectar bats, such as this Mexican long-tongued bat (*Choeronycteris mexicana*), as they flit among the research station's hummingbird feeders gathering nectar.

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