



The future of the endangered Indiana myotis may hinge on restoring hibernation caves that once held great colonies but are now mostly empty because they have been altered by humans. The first step is finding those caves, and their names may serve as signposts.

Alterations that change airflow and push temperatures beyond those tolerated by the hibernating bats were often made by 19th century miners. They were usually mining potassium nitrate, known as saltpeter – an essential component of gunpowders of the time. A prime source of saltpeter is bat guano, so the guano found in bat caves was aggressively mined.

Such alterations can often be undone or otherwise modified to restore appropriate conditions that will once again permit large numbers of Indiana myotis to use these caves for hibernation sites. Finding and restoring these caves is a key to increasing the odds for this species' survival.

The mining history offers a powerful clue to finding abandoned bat caves: Many caves in the Indiana myotis' range include the word "saltpeter" in their formal or local names. These clearly are choice candidates for past use by bats. Bat Conservation International is beginning to search them out through its Appalachian Saltpeter Caves Project.

The Kentucky phase of the program, in what was historically the most important state for hibernating Indiana myotis, is identifying and exploring these saltpeter caves and assessing their previous use and potential for restoration for Indiana myotis.

Databases and local contacts have identified well over 650 caves (more than 150 in Kentucky alone) with 'saltpeter' in their names or a known history of saltpeter mining within the bats' range.

While visiting the first 39 Kentucky caves, we found five that once housed significant populations of hibernating bats, perhaps as many as 2 million Indiana myotis. Two of the caves offer good potential for restoration. Surveys resume in 2006.

You can support this vital project to save the endangered Indiana myotis by contacting BCI's Development Office at development@batcon.org.

BCI members can read the complete story of a new direction of the Indiana myotis recovery effort in the Winter 2005 issue of BATS magazine.

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