

Conservation Corner

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Once again autumn is upon us, bringing football games, harvest preparations, and bat monitoring. Yes, in addition to area teams and farmers gearing up to take the field, this fall several agencies have been gearing up to monitor and study area bat populations. Perhaps you've noticed the antennae towers that have popped up along the Des Moines River Corridor near Bradgate and wondered what's up.

Last week I visited with Aaron McAlexander, a bat biologist and field supervisor with WEST, Inc., who are currently working with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and the Iowa DNR to better understand the migration patterns of bats here in north central Iowa. Here's what I learned.

What's up, of course, is White Nose Syndrome (WNS), a deadly fungus that has decimated bat populations across eastern North America. First detected in 2006 in New York State, WNS has now been confirmed in 26 states, including Iowa. WNS is a white fungus that grows on the face and wings of bats, irritating them and waking them up during their winter hibernation. As a result, their fat reserves are quickly used up and they starve to death. With mortality rates of 80-90%, an estimated 6 million bats have already died while overwintering in caves.

In the past we have discussed the important role bats play in our ecosystem. You may remember that all nine Iowa bat species are members of the Family Vespertilionidae and all are insect eaters, consuming up to half their body weight in mosquitoes, beetles, and moths each and every night. And while the effect on insect populations is unknown at this time, I can't imagine it will be good news.

Research here in Pocahontas County has focused on Northern Long-Eared Bats as well as Little Brown Bats. To date, 15 towers have been erected and 20 bats have been tagged and released. When completed, the system of 30 towers along the Des Moines River Corridor and at potential area hibernacula sites such as Ledges and Dolliver Park along with the small, temporary radio transmitters will permit scientists to identify and track the movement of around 30 individual bats and help answer these critical questions: When are they leaving? What direction are they flying? Where are they going?



There is some good news. So far the bats they've captured here in Pocahontas County appear to be in good health with no severe signs of WNS. Unfortunately, WNS has been detected as close as Webster County. We trust that this research along with other efforts and programs will lead to a cure as many people work together to figure it out before it's too late.

Before we know it, autumn will give way to winter. Another football season will be in the books, another crop in the bin, and another bat migration in the caves. As the towers come down, we trust the bats will survive hibernation and return to our fields, once again seeking and searching the nighttime summer skies over Iowa.

