

“Where have all the Bats Gone?”

By: Suzanne Haig, Vice President Deep River Land Trust, for the Lower Connecticut River and Coastal Region Land Trust Exchange

Last August 15th, some 150 people attended a forum “Where have all the Bats Gone?”, held at the Chester Meeting House. Jenny Dickson, Supervising Wildlife Biologist of the Ct. DEP, briefed the audience on the status of a disease known as White Nose Syndrome (WNS) that has killed over 1 million bats in the US.

The condition, named for a previously unknown fungus, *Geomyces destructans*, first appeared on bats in upstate New York caves in 2006 and has now spread from the northeast to states south and west as far as Virginia and Tennessee and into Ontario, Canada. It is believed that the disease erodes, and invades the skin, particularly the wings, of hibernating bats. While scientists have discovered that the fungus responds to some antiseptics, there is no method at this time for curbing the disease and many questions remain unanswered. Furthermore, most bat species give birth to only one pup per year, which means that it is unlikely that affected populations can recover quickly from the devastating effects.

Jenny Dickson has been surveying caves in Connecticut and tracking the mortality rates of bats in the state since the inception of the disease. Connecticut has eight species of the eleven hundred known species of bats in the world, and the two most common here and in much of the northeast are the Little Brown Bat and the Big Brown Bat.

In Connecticut, WNS is affecting the Little Brown Bat and the Indiana Bat which is already on the Federal Endangered Species List. Some fear that the Little Brown Bat faces regional and possibly total extinction. Three of the other species in Connecticut are tree roosting bats which are not affected by the fungus. Why some are infected and others are not is unknown at this time.

The August meeting was sponsored and built by eleven organizations, primarily local Land Trusts from the towns of Deep River, Chester, East Haddam, Haddam, Essex, Lynde Point of Old Saybrook, Old Lyme, and Westbrook. The meeting had originally been planned by the Deep River Land Trust as a town event. However, members felt that it was vital to reach out beyond the town and join forces with other land trusts to educate as many people as possible in the Lower Ct. River Valley, an important area for bats during the summer months when they give birth and raise their young.

As a result of this coordination, posters, informational leaflets and brochures, and even a special "bat bookmark" designed by Maureen Heidtmann of East Hampton were widely distributed, plus the meeting received extensive press and coverage along with information about the WNS crisis. Notices were seen at town fairs, farmers markets, in store windows, town halls, libraries, schools, and garden centers among others. Organizers believe that the widespread publicity was significant in getting out educational information on bats and WNS to many in area way beyond the number that attended the meeting. This could not have occurred without the joint efforts of all the groups involved.

In addition to land trusts, sponsors included the Chester Conservation Commission, the Connecticut River Gateway Commission which broadcast the meeting on its web site, and the Connecticut River Estuary Region (CRERPA) which deserves special mention for laying the groundwork for collaborative efforts among the land trusts.

Since October 2009, Margot Burns of CRERPA has been holding bi-monthly meetings of "The Lower Connecticut River and Coastal Region Land Trust Exchange" which gives the land trusts an opportunity to discuss common issues, learn about grants and programs of interest, and hear presentations that can aid them in their work. As a result of having this organization in place, CRERPA was able to reach out to the land trusts for sponsorship and organizational support in building the August meeting. The Agency was also able to get the word out at town halls and libraries as a result of CRERPA's work with the towns in the region.

The most important point, however is that these bi-monthly meetings of CRERPA have helped the land trusts see themselves as part of a particularly important region that has issues that must be addressed by all of us collectively from time to time. We are learning that sometimes we must reach beyond our town and the lands that we manage and join forces for a common good, a larger stewardship -- helping to protect the wildlife and natural space that makes up this lower Connecticut River Valley area, known of course as one of the "Last Great Places."

Thus the idea of working together to inform the general public about the plight of bats and the important role they play for humans might have seemed unusual just a few years ago, but now was seen as the right thing to do.

What can we do next?

Dickson pointed out that it was important to follow the bats during the summer period to find out if their numbers are decreasing in the areas where they are usually seen and also if the birth rate is being affected by the disease even if the adult bats are free of the disease. The DEP has a program to coordinate site surveys to provide them this information gathered by the public. This is clearly something that groups and individuals can do in our area which, with its marshes and woodland ponds, provides important areas for bats during the summer months.

At the meeting, a number of people signed up to volunteer. Coordinating the activity of these volunteers and working with the DEP can be an important project for individual land trusts this spring and summer. Dickson has also indicated she would report back to us after the winter surveys of caves are completed.

People have also been asking about setting up bat houses. If set up in the proper location, these can provide a permanent location for bats to raise their young, and it makes surveying the colonies easier.

It should be noted that enthusiasm and concern was so high that between individual land trusts and participants at the meeting \$600 dollars was donated. After expenses were taken out, \$450 was given to the DEP "Nonharvested Wildlife Fund."

Since last August, a central coordinating body, the White-Nose Syndrome Executive Committee has formed, co-chaired by the US Fish & Wildlife Service with other governmental organizations as well as representatives from Canada and Mexico. The committee will provide the cooperative leadership necessary for implementing a national plan, and providing grants for targeted research. It will bring together the various scientific and technical efforts that have been ongoing since the surfacing of the disease. Further information on this effort can be found at: <http://www.fws.gov/WhiteNoseSyndrome/>.