Bats in Wisconsin

“Bats are important to almost every ecosystem on the planet. They act as natural pest control eating not only human pests but also forestry and agricultural pests, as well as seed dispersers and pollinators for foods we eat every day. In Wisconsin alone, bats provide an estimated $658 million every year in pest suppression services.”

This is one of the important facts we learned from Heather Kaarakka at a Blue Mounds Area Project (BMAP) winter lecture series. Heather coordinates the Wisconsin Bat Program program for Wisconsin. Part of her responsibilities is compiling the annual roost report and coordinating various bat counts. Jim and I have been active with bat counts for many years at Lake Yellowstone, on our own property, and a few other sites in the vicinity. As part of our bio inventory, I have written up a brief summary about bats.

A current challenge of our bats is White-nose syndrome (WNS); it is an ugly disease that is headed our way. It could decimate our state bat population before we get a handle on

its cause much less a handle on its cure. WNS is a fungal infection that has been described and named *Geomyces destructans* by Wisconsin talent. The lead author, Andrea Gargas, is a BMAP member and bat counter, too!

Heather wrote up some talking points regarding Wisconsin and bats. Please feel free to share these with others.

In 2007, David Redell began the Wisconsin Bat Program with the goal of monitoring and inventorying bat populations across the state using various survey methods. The majority of summer data is collected by volunteers trained to conduct surveys and the Bat Program has state-wide data from past 8 years of effort.

In 2007, a fungal disease was discovered in bats hibernating in a New York cave. The disease was later named white-nose syndrome because of the white fungal growth on the muzzle and wings of affected bats. The disease is deadly to bats and mortality rates of up to 100% in affected hibernacula are not uncommon. US Fish and Wildlife Services (USFWS) estimates that over 7 million bats have died from the disease.

Wisconsin is on the forefront of research on WNS and bats not only because of the Wisconsin Bat Program, but because Federal agencies such as USGS Wildlife Health Lab are located in the state. The Wildlife Health lab not only receives the majority of samples from hibernacula for testing and documenting the spread of WNS, but the lab is a leader in research of WNS and commonly partners with the Bat Program on studies.

WNS is spreading quickly and continues to show high mortality rates. Until 2014, Wisconsin remained WNS-free and the Bat Program was able to collect years of baseline data prior to the arrival of the disease, something the eastern US was not able to do.

The Wisconsin Bat Program is on the forefront of WNS research and does so almost entirely through grants and gifts, and

generous donation of time by volunteers