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Batty over bats

Experts survey Bankhead bat population

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Batman mania swept the nation this year in the weeks leading up to and following the release of the latest movie about the ever-popular fictional crimefighter.

Batman mania of a different sort swept through northwest Alabama this week.

More than 100 men and women donned hard hats, boots and garb that included jewelry, T-shirts and caps featuring images of bats this week and together roamed the hills and hollows of Winston and Lawrence counties at night. They were not searching for the Joker, Two-Face or other foes of the legendary superhero. Instead, they were looking for bats.

"These folks are the real bat men and bat women," said Keith Hudson, of Florence, a wildlife biologist for the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

The group went to Bankhead National Forest to conduct what has become the most comprehensive study of bats in Alabama. Their mission has been to identify as many bat species as possible and hopefully determine the overall health of the bat population.

"Just as some people love bald eagles and some love snakes and salamanders, these men and women love bats," Hudson said. "They are all bat experts. Some are state and federal wildlife agencies, some are professors or students from colleges and universities, some work at zoos. The one thing they all have in common is a passion for bats,"

The researchers traveled from as far as Vermont and Texas to participate in the first bat blitz in Alabama.

Researchers used nets and traps to collect and analyze more than 300 bats from 11 species.



Jim Hannon/TimesDaily

Keith Hudson, a biologist for the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, examines a Northern Long-eared Bat, during a survey at Bankhead National Forest. More than 100 experts roamed the forest this week in the most comprehensive study of bats in Alabama.

The captured bats were released after being checked by the scientists.

"The data collected during the blitz will help us make management decisions for the forest," said Tom Counts, of Tuscumbia, district wildlife biologist for Bankhead National Forest.

"Everything we do from cutting a tree to building a road in the forest is based on its impact on the forest, including any possible impact to the rare bat species that live here. The data will also be used for years to come by scientists all across the country when they prepare research papers about bats."

Counts said the survey revealed the bat population in the forest is thriving.

"Our bats are in good shape," he said. "We think a lot of that is because we have a healthy forest."

Hudson said scientists and volunteers participating in the blitz collected more data in three nights than he and other local biologists who monitor bat populations in Bankhead Forest could have gathered in two years.

Counts said the blitz revealed that some species of bats are plentiful in the forest. Others, such as the Indiana bat, are imperiled. Only one Indiana bat was captured during the three nights of the blitz.

Hudson said Indiana bats are extremely rare. He said loss of habitat and human interference has led to a sharp decline in several bat species, including the Indiana bat.

"Someone who enters a cave where some of the really rare bats have a maternity colony and causes the bats to panic can wipe out all of that year's reproduction if the babies are knocked to the floor as the parents flee," Hudson said. "That's why it's so important that we identify the caves where the rare bats live and take steps to protect them."

Hudson said Bankhead National Forest is one of the best places in Alabama to study bats. Hudson also monitors the bat population at caves in the Shoals, including Key Cave in Lauderdale County.

"The Bankhead has a great diversity of bats because it has a wide range of habitat," he said. "It's at the southern tip of the Appalachian Mountains with influences from the northern range of the Coastal Plains. It has lots of micro habitats that are attractive to many different species of bats."

Hudson said 12 of the 15 species of bats that live in Alabama can be found in Bankhead National Forest. Those species include cave bats, such as the northern long-eared bat, which spends the day in caves. In addition, there are forest bats such as the big brown bat, which spends the day roosting in trees.

While many people fear bats, Counts said there is no reason for anyone to be afraid to visit the Bankhead Forest because of the concentration of bats that live there. He said bats are one of the most misunderstood members of the animal kingdom, and there is no reason for humans to fear them.

"Once you spend just a little time studying them, you realize just how neat they are,"

Counts said. "They are the night shift of purple martins. The martins eat insects all day and bats eat them all night."

Hudson calls bats nature's insect control. Mosquitoes are a staple in the diet of insect-eating bats. He said bats use sound waves to find insects in total darkness through a process known as echolocation. He said bats sometimes use their tail and legs to shape their body into the form of catcher's mitt to capture insects while flying.

Tim Carter, an assistant professor of biology at Ball State University in Muncie, Ind., who helped with the bat blitz, said bats play an important role in nature.

"They are just as important as song birds," Carter said. "In some areas, bats are just as numerous as song birds. The only difference is song birds are out when we can see them and bats come out at night."

Angie Price, who cares for bats at the Memphis Zoo, is a huge fan of flying mammals. She also helped with the blitz.

"I've liked bats all my life, but I've been bat crazy after raising two baby bats last year," she said.

Hudson said many people have a misconception that rabies is rampant in the bat population. While they can be infected with the disease, rabid bats are rare.

"Just like raccoons, foxes and any other wild mammal, bats can catch rabies," he said. "It's rare for humans to catch rabies from a bat. A human fatality from rabies transmitted by a bat is extremely rare."

Since bats can transmit rabies, Hudson and the other biologists who handle them have been vaccinated for the disease that is fatal in humans when left untreated.

Hudson said bats do not attack humans but will bite when captured.

"If you catch a cardinal, it's going to ruin your day because it's going to peck you," Carter said.

"If you catch a bat, it's going to try to bite you. If you don't want to be bitten by a bat, don't mess with one. If you find a bat on the ground, leave it alone."

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