Ozark Plateau National Wildlife Refuge Hosts Bat Blitz for White Nose Syndrome

The Ozark Plateau National Wildlife Refuge hosted the Southeastern Bat Diversity Network's 12th Annual Bat Blitz, July 28 – August 1, 2013. A bat blitz is a coordinated, intensive bat survey designed to sample the bat community in an extensive area. About 100 people participated in this year's bat blitz. Ten teams were divided up into field crews of about 10 each to conduct the surveys. Experienced bat researchers served as team leaders at each netting sight and supervised the work of the field crews. Both federal and state fish and wildlife permits were acquired prior to the event. Mist-nets were used to capture bats over three consecutive nights at about 30 different netting sites in the Ozark Highlands of northeastern Oklahoma. Netting sites included the Ozark Plateau National Wildlife Refuge, Wildlife Management Areas owned and managed by the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation (ODWC), and lands owned by the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, the City of Tulsa, and The Nature Conservancy. Hundreds of bats of nine different species were captured during the Bat Blitz. Predominant species were the eastern red, tri-colored, northern long-eared, and evening bat. Several Ozark big-eared and gray bats, both federally-listed endangered, also were captured. The Bat Blitz provided the Service, the ODWC, and other conservation partners with important information about the occurrence of bat species in northeastern Oklahoma prior to the arrival of the fungus that causes white-nose syndrome (WNS), which is estimated to have killed over 5.7 million bats since first discovered near Albany, New York during the winter of 2006/2007. The event also helped bring awareness to the important role that bats play as major consumers of insects including mosquitos, and other insects that are agricultural crop and forest pests. Experts estimate that bats in the United States provide billions of dollars a year in pest control services. The fungus that causes WNS currently is not known from northeastern Oklahoma. Bat-to-bat transmission is believed to be the primary vector for the spread of the fungus. However, several precautionary measures were implemented during the Bat Blitz to reduce any risk of human transmission: 1) The National WNS Decontamination Protocol was implemented during the Bat Blitz, and all gear utilized was decontaminated between each netting night; 2) No clothing, footwear, vehicles or gear (headlamps, etc.) that had previously been used for bat or cave research from a WNS suspect or confirmed state outside of Oklahoma was allowed; and 3) Only new mist-nets and poles purchased by the Refuge were used. **A news video about the Bat Blitz by the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma can be found here: http://youtu.be/rrfw3HJTR88**

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