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The Trouble With Chiroptera (Bats)

By ELEANOR RANDOLPH

Nights often bring out the best in the Adirondacks. The darkness comes with great variety, from an opaque, inky blue to a moonlit silver that flattens the familiar landscape into an exotic silhouette. Throughout these various nights and over many summers, the bats have always been there. They came at you swiftly, leaving only a faint gust of air as they detoured at the last possible instant.

This year, however, the bats are missing. In their place are their favorite delicacies — the mosquitoes, the flies, the all-purpose bugs that now freely inhabit the north country air. A night ride on a boat, even a slow one like ours, now means weathering tiny assaults. “I feel like a human windshield,” one rider lamented amid a recent swarm.

Bats usually eat half their weight in bugs every evening, but anyone who cares about the balance of living things knows the bugs are not the real problem.

As explained by Alan Hicks, a bat specialist for New York State, the little brown bats dying in the caves of New York signal a wider environmental problem — like the loss of frogs or any of the other millions of species now disappearing rapidly.

In the last three years, New York’s experts on bats have been trying to save them from a dreaded fungus called *geomyces destructans*, or white-nose syndrome. The fungus creates a little white ring around the bat’s tiny nose, and wildlife experts are not yet sure why it is killing so many of these nocturnal creatures.

Suspensions range from a poison in the fungus to the possibility that it wakes the bats during hibernation and causes them to die of starvation. Whatever it does, white-nose syndrome has killed about a half-million bats in New York in the last two or three years.

“We had one cave. It used to have about 200,000 little browns,” Mr. Hicks sighed. “Now it is down to a few thousand. It’s heart-wrenching.”

With the disease spreading, Dr. Ward Stone, a New York State pathologist, is among those trying to find a treatment. One possibility is a spray made from the anti-mold substance used in bread. Others are closing bat caves from human spelunkers who may carry the disease on their clothes. Wildlife experts know that saving the bats is important for nature. Some of us simply miss the little animals every beautiful moonlit, bug-laden night.

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