

Bats in the belfry

Nova Scotia Bat Conservation seeks more south shore bat sightings

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Folklore and horror films have not done bats any favours.

Often portrayed as evil creatures, bats are actually beneficial to our world. Bats are pollinators and they eat insects like mosquitoes.

But white-nose syndrome, caused by an invasive fungus, has decimated bat populations throughout Canada, including Nova Scotia. According to the Nova Scotia Bat Conservation web page, during the winter of 2012-2013, white-nose syndrome caused a 95 per cent decline of bats in five of Nova Scotia's largest overwintering sites.

"The resident bat populations have declined to very low numbers, probably less than five per cent of the original populations," says Brad Toms, a wildlife biologist with the Mersey Tobeatic Research Institute in Queens County.

As a result, the research institute started its Nova Scotia Bat Conservation web page and began monitoring where bats are found across the province.

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Toms notes that white-nose syndrome has been found in every county of the province that had large resident bat populations.

"It hasn't been detected in Yarmouth, Shelburne, Queens and Lunenburg and Pictou Counties, but that is more likely a reflection those counties having fewer, or fewer known, overwintering sites where it could have been detected before the drastic provincial decline," says Toms. "Overall we receive fewer sightings from the south shore than other parts of the province."

It is too early to determine how Nova Scotia and the other Maritime provinces compare with the rest of Canada.

"The decline in the Maritimes has been very severe, very fast and very comprehensive," he says. "It is tough to say how that compares to other places in Canada because it is hard to say whether



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the same amount of effort has been put into detecting it across jurisdictions."

Currently, white-nose syndrome is still east of the 100th meridian, Toms explains, but it has crossed the Mississippi River and is as far west as the Atikokan area in Ontario.

White-nose syndrome appears to have had less of an impact on migratory bats.

"Migratory species of bats can still be seen in some regularity

during the summer, as well, and we don't have evidence that their populations have been greatly affected," he says.

So far there is no way to curb the spread of white-nose syndrome.

"There is hopeful research, but proven results and a safe method are likely years away. Bats reproduce at a very low rate and recovery of the population will take a long time," he says.

That's why preserving bats'

habitat and helping them by building bat houses is so important.

"Creating safe habitat (including bat houses) for the remaining females to raise their young and not disturbing them at maternal colonies, or anywhere else they are found, will ensure that the recovery isn't any slower than it already is," he says.

The Canadian Wildlife Federation has its HelpTheBats.ca page, which offers suggestions and an

activities toolkit for helping bats, including how to build and install a bat box: <http://cwf-fcf.org/en/do-something/challenges-projects/help-the-bats/>

For information specific to Nova Scotia, visit the Nova Scotia Bat Conservation web page at www.batconservation.ca. The website includes a form people can fill out to report bat sightings in Nova Scotia.