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# Warming may be key to saving bats from white-nose syndrome

The diseased mammals wake from hibernation before the insects they eat are available. Scientists think placing warming boxes in caves will help save the bats' energy stores, and perhaps their lives.

By Thomas H. Maugh II  
March 7, 2009

Placing heated boxes in caves to keep hibernating bats warm when they wake prematurely may help stave off mortality from white-nose syndrome, the mysterious disease decimating bat populations in the Northeast, researchers said this week.

Biologists suspect that a recently identified fungus that may be linked to the disease rouses bats from their slumber during winter when the mammals' normal diet of insects is not available.

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The bats' efforts to raise their body temperature during these wakeful periods depletes their energy stores, making it difficult for them to make it through the winter.

Most of the dead animals observed have been severely emaciated.

Graduate student Justin G. Boyles of Indiana State University and biologist Craig K. R. Willis of Canada's University of Winnipeg proposed Thursday in the journal *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment* that placing small heated boxes in the caves would help the roused bats warm up without depleting their energy stores.

Computer modeling suggested that the heaters could reduce deaths by about 75%.

The researchers propose using insulated boxes about 18 inches by 12 inches by 6 inches that would hold about 200 bats. A heater coil like those used in snake cages could raise the temperature inside the box as high as 80 degrees and not disturb the cave environment. It would be powered by car batteries linked to solar cells.

Waking bats normally seek out the warmest section of the cave, Boyles said. They would probably fly into the box to warm up, then go about their business.

The two researchers have been building prototypes, "and we hope to have them in caves in the next couple of weeks," Boyles said.

They will test them in unaffected caves in Manitoba, Canada.

First detected in northeastern New York state in 2006, white-nose syndrome has spread to six states, killing hundreds of thousands of bats, particularly brown bats.

Farmers and others are concerned because bats are voracious eaters of insects that carry diseases and attack crops. A healthy bat can eat 100% of its weight in insects each night.

Boyles conceded that helping the infected bats to survive might possibly increase spread of the disease. But, he noted, some research suggests that the fungus does not do well above about 68 degrees.

"If that is the case, they are experiencing much higher temperatures during the summer and increasing survival shouldn't increase the rate of spread," he said.

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