

Northern Long Eared Bats

Barry Burgason, Chair, MFPC/SFI Wildlife Committee

You must have been living under a rock the last several years if you have not heard that several species of bats are in big trouble due to a fungus that causes what is known as “white nose syndrome” or WNS. The species most affected are those colonial roosting bats that hibernate in caves. One of those species is the Northern Long Eared Bat (NLEB), which is currently under consideration by the USFWS for listing as endangered or threatened under the Endangered Species Act. In surveys of some caves, population declines around 90% have been documented since the discovery of WNS in NY in 2006. A final determination on the listing may come in October 2014.

During the winter, NLEBs gather in caves or old mines, where they are susceptible to the fungus. However, in the spring, summer and fall, they become creatures of the forest; feeding in and under the canopy at night and roosting in hollow trees, under sloughing bark or in cracks and crevices of trees 3” DBH and greater. June to mid-July is the maternity period when the females roost together in small colonies to raise their young. It is their time in the forest and our activities during that time that creates a connection to us as forest landowners. Should NLEBs become listed under ESA (which they probably will), landowners need to understand what will happen next.

On May 28, the MFPC wildlife committee invited bat biologists, agency representatives and landowners to a meeting at the Council office to learn about NLEBs, the pending listing and the implications for our timber harvesting. Currently, the bat experts in Maine are a small group of consulting biologists who work primarily with wind turbine developers and transmission line builders to site and permit their projects. Censusing bats with mist nets and acoustic antennae are used to collect info in the vicinity of a proposed project. Trevor Peterson from Stantec Consulting; Aaron Svedlow from Tetra Tech and Dave Yates from the BioDiversity Research Institute started the meeting with a “biology of the NLEB 101” presentation. USFWS biologist Wendy Mahaney discussed the listing process and her agency’s responsibilities under the Endangered Species Act. Also attending the meeting were Charlie Todd, MEIFW endangered species biologist and John DePue, MEIFW furbearer and bat biologist.

An open-ended discussion followed the presentations. The obvious concern for landowners is the “incidental take” provision of the ESA, which prohibits killing or the destruction of habitat of an endangered species. One thing that became clear was that there is still much to be learned about the biology of NLEBs. What is the best way to survey for them? Where do they hibernate in Maine? How common/rare are they? What is suitable habitat? What is optimal habitat? How can you define a “habitat guideline” for them if you don’t know these basics and – finally – do they eat spruce budworm?

Mahaney expressed her thanks to MFPC for the invitation to meet with landowners and perhaps cooperate on research projects and the development of guidelines that can help NLEBs and other bat species that patrol our woods. She promised to keep us informed on the listing process and recovery efforts of the Service. While WNS is the acknowledged “bad guy”, forest landowners can, again, be the “good guys” that provide the quality habitat for bats, should they be able to overcome WNS.