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Right off the bat

Network's annual blitz nets 462 flying mammals at largest gathering yet

By [Morgan Simmons](#) ([Contact](#))
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[Saul Young](#) - [click on image to enlarge](#)

A *lasiurus borealis*, more commonly known as an eastern red bat, bites into the gloved finger of Joy O'Keefe, a doctoral student at Clemson University's department of forestry and natural resources. O'Keefe was the team leader for the Southeastern Bat Diversity Network's annual bat blitz in upper East Tennessee.



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LED lamps illuminate the wing membrane and fingers of an eastern red bat captured at the Dennis Cove campground near Elizabethton, Tenn., last week. More than 100 bat experts participated in the three-day event.

ELIZABETHTON, Tenn. — They are called mist nets. Biologists use them to capture and study songbirds, but they work equally well on bats.

Last week's bat blitz, hosted by the Southeastern Bat Diversity Network, was the largest ever, attracting more than 100 bat experts from eight state agencies, five federal agencies, 17 colleges and 13 other organizations.

Headquarters for this year's event was Roan Mountain State Park in northeastern Tennessee. Each night, the scientists and volunteers fanned out into the adjoining Cherokee and Pisgah national forests to designated netting sites, most of them near or over water.

Netting at 50 different sites over four consecutive nights, they captured 462 bats of seven species, including the big brown bat, eastern red bat, eastern small-footed bat, little brown bat, northern long-eared bat, gray bat and eastern pipestrelle.

Mary Dodson, wildlife biologist with the Cherokee National Forest, said the bat blitzes give land managers a better understanding of local bat communities and the importance of forests to their populations.

"We are getting four or five years worth of information in just a few nights," Dodson said. "The volume of surveying and data collection during a bat blitz is greater than the work a single biologist can accomplish during an entire season."

One of the sites surveyed last week was Laurel Fork, a mountain stream that flows through the Cherokee National Forest in Carter County.

An hour before nightfall, the team of bat biologists had seven mist nets set up on aluminum poles. Several of the nets were placed along the bank in such a way as to funnel the bats into a downstream net stretched across the stream at the base of a pool.



Saul Young

Sara Gardner, left, of Auburn University, and Lindsey Shiflet, of the University of North Carolina-Greensboro, set up mist nets at the Dennis Cove campground to capture bats for study and tagging during the annual bat blitz.



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Jeff Corcoran, left, of Southern Illinois University, and Joy O'Keefe, a doctoral student at Clemson University's department of forestry and natural resources and team leader of the Southeastern Bat Diversity Network's annual bat blitz, take a closer look at one of the bats captured last week.

BAT FACTS

- All the bat species found in Tennessee are insect eaters. A single bat can catch hundreds of insects in an hour, and large colonies catch tons of

Lindsey Shiflet, a graduate student at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro, said streams serve as natural feeding corridors for many bat species.

"There's an art to setting the nets," Shiflet said. "You have to think like a bat."

At 8:50 p.m., the survey team unrolled the mist nets, which were light as silk and looked suitable for badminton. Their base of operation was a picnic area approximately 50 yards from the nets. Every eight minutes, three people from the team would head off through the rhododendron thickets to check the nets. Everyone wore waders and headlamps.

Joy O'Keefe, doctoral student at Clemson University's department of forestry and natural resources, was the team leader. On her left hand she wore a glove to protect her from the bats' needle-sharp teeth. She said it was a batting glove, the kind used by baseball players.

"We can expect to catch nine or 10 species of bats here tonight," O'Keefe said. "Most of them roost in trees in the summer."

At 9 p.m., they caught the first bat of the night — a northern long-eared bat that weighed 6.4 grams. Like all the bats captured during the bat blitz, this one was released after it was weighed, measured and examined.

The Cherokee National Forest is home to two federally listed bats, the gray bat and the Indiana bat. A third federally listed species, the Virginia big-eared bat, is likely also in the Cherokee National Forest since it is known to live in neighboring forests in North Carolina and Virginia.

The second bat captured that night was an eastern pipestrelle, and the third was another northern long-eared bat.

At 10:40 p.m., they captured an eastern red bat, one of the night's most cantankerous specimens. The bat's fur was thick and pale red. It had long wings and weighed a whopping 12 grams.

A screech owl called from the distance, and a full moon hung overhead. The bat team said they didn't expect to be in bed until 3 a.m.

Melissa Miller, a biologist with the North Carolina Department of Transportation, said the Bat Diversity Network's annual bat blitzes are the highlight of her year.

"It's a reunion among people who share a passion for bats," Miller said. "For me, it's a rare opportunity to learn new field

insects every night.

techniques and hang out with people as weird as I am.”

- Bats are mammals, and like humans they give birth to live young. In the United States and Canada, most bats mate in the fall. In the spring, pregnant females form nursery colonies, giving birth in litters of one or two. Baby bats learn to fly within three weeks. Some bats survive for as long as 34 years.

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- Most bats communicate and navigate with high frequency sounds, or echolocation. In total darkness, bats can detect obstacles as fine as a human hair.
- Bats can be found in almost any conceivable shelter but are best known for living in caves. Many species adapt to living in only one or a few types of shelter and cannot survive anywhere else. Some species that now roost in buildings do so because they have no natural alternatives.
- Bats are beneficial. In addition to keeping insects in check, they play a role in pollinating plants. Bat studies have helped scientists develop navigational techniques for the blind, birth control and artificial insemination techniques, vaccines and a better understanding of low temperature surgical procedures.

Source: U.S. Forest Service

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