

# Use basic forest management to benefit bats, friends of the forest

**M**any of the same basic forestry practices that improve forest health and productivity can also maintain or enhance habitat for bats.

“Almost all North American bats rely on forests for survival,” says Dan Taylor, a conservation specialist with Bat Conservation International (BCI).

“At the same time, bats are vital to healthy forest ecosystems. But they have long been neglected in forest management planning. Just a little tweaking of sound forestry practices with bats in mind can help them thrive and carry out their role in the ecosystem,” says Taylor.

That role is as primary predators of night-flying insects. All but three of the 45 species of bats found in the United States and Canada feed solely on insects, including many destructive agricultural and forest pests. The other species feed on pollen and nectar and play an important role in pollination and seed dispersal in southwestern deserts.

Bats devour insects; a single little brown myotis, a common forest resident, can consume 1,000 mosquito-sized insects in just an hour.

A colony of 150 big brown bats, which often roost in tree cavities, can eat enough cucumber beetles each summer to eliminate as many as 33 million of their rootworm larvae. The 20 million Mexican free-tailed bats at Bracken Cave, Texas, eat about 200 tons of insects nightly.

More than half of American bat species are thought to be in decline or are endangered, with their reliance on forest habitat paramount.

Bats require three basic habitats: resources for roosting, foraging, and drinking. More than half roost in dead and dying trees (snags), especially beneath loose bark; in tree cavities

and hollows; or in crevices left by lightning strikes.

The most important action forest landowners can take to maintain bat populations is to provide a continuous supply of potential roost trees. These include snags in various stages of deterioration (especially those in early stages of decay), hollow trees, and the green and dying trees that can provide future snags.

Since bats forage along forest edges, over streamside riparian areas, along forest roads and trails, and in natural forest gaps or harvest-created openings, those are priority areas for maintaining snag trees.

Prescribed fire and thinning are usually helpful to bats because they open flight space and increase plant growth on the forest floor that favors their insect prey.

Maintaining riparian zones in managed forests is critical for forest health, and the mix of vegetation and water is often the most important habitat for bats. In the absence of natural ponds, creating ponds within an open area in a forest will help bats as well as many other wildlife species.

With more than half the nonindustrial forest lands in the United States privately owned, forest landowners play a vital role in wildlife stewardship, according to Ed Hackett, a wildlife biologist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Agricultural Wildlife Conservation Center (AWCC). The AWCC, located in Madison, Mississippi, is a fish and wildlife technology development center.

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Photo by Darren Miller



Snag tree left for bats (*top*); Water supply for bats (*bottom*)

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