

Georgia WILD Newsletter: October 2009

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Laci Coleman and Michael Blubaugh, bat conservation interns with the Georgia DNR Natural Resources' Nongame Conservation Section, helped document where Rafinesque's big-eared bats and Southeastern myotis are found in the state this summer. Both bats are high-priority species in the State Wildlife Action Plan. The interns worked from May to August 2009. The following is a diary Laci kept throughout the summer.

People mentioned in these accounts include Nongame wildlife biologists Thomas Floyd, Jason Wisniewski, Trina Morris and Nikki Castleberry, University of Georgia graduate students Matt Clement and Jay Scott, and Alison McGee of The Nature Conservancy. Trina Morris supervised the interns.

Week 1: May 18-22

Monday morning we met in the office to go over basic rules, fill out paperwork and generally get acquainted with the position and each other. Tuesday morning we headed out early. Matt Clement and Michael went straight to Moody Forest Natural Area while Trina and I drove to Albany to pick up our state truck before heading to Moody to meet the guys. Monday night we saw our first Rafinesque's big-eared bat (below) in an abandoned house on the property. Tuesday through Friday we went out into swamps where Matt had previously found bats so we could get the hang of things. We found two new roosts: one with a Raf and a Southeastern myotis, and another with a maternity colony of about a dozen Rafs.

Week 2: May 25-29

... We went to Phinizy Swamp WMA to check a slough Wednesday. We did not find any roosts, but we believe the reason for this is the high water levels and our inability to check a large number of trees. On Thursday, we met with the owner of a private easement southeast of Yuchi WMA where we found plenty of habitat, but were once again unable check a large amount of the habitat due to high-water levels. We may try and return to this area later in the summer if water levels go down. We went back to Phinizy on Friday to check another large area. The high water got us again! Although we did not find any bats, we did find a decent amount of suitable habitat and were able to enjoy quite a bit of wildlife such as river otters, plenty of large gators and abundance of birds.

Week 3: June 1-5

This week we stayed at the Richmond Hill Fish Hatchery, which is by far one of the nicest places that we have been to. We shared the house with some fisheries interns living there for the summer. It was nice to meet nice new people who could show us around. ... Tuesday and Wednesday we worked on Fort Stewart. Two very helpful technicians were assigned to escort us around the base and lead us to swamps and bridges. The mud in this area was by far the

worst to walk through up to this point; all of the swamps we were able to search were extremely wet and soft. A lot of the best habitat was either underwater or on areas we were unable to access due to military training. Because of this, the technicians suggested that we return to the base some time after the first week of July in order to check more areas. Although we were unable to find bats in the trees on Fort Stewart, we did find a large concrete bridge where over 100 bats were roosting with their young. We know for sure that some of these bats were Rafs, but we are not completely certain of other species. ...

Week 4: June 8-12

This week we stayed at Hannahatchee WMA and worked there and at Fort Benning and Standing Boy Creek Tract. We knew coming to this area that the habitat would be less than impressive, so we chose to focus a lot on bridges and old buildings if we could find them. Fort Benning had a lot of good-sized bridges for us to look at as well as some old buildings, an old chimneystack and several bat boxes. We didn't find any bats under any of the bridges, which is why we decided to look in other places. There are previous records of Southeastern myotis living on the base so we knew they must be roosting somewhere. Finally, on Wednesday, we found a bat box in a neighborhood on the military base that was a roost to about 15-20 Southeastern myotis bats.

Neither Standing Boy Creek nor Hannahatchee had any substantial swamp habitat so we spent minimal time in both places. ... Although the area this week was pretty disappointing, we are happy to have found a new roost and are excited about the upcoming weeks.

Weeks 5 and 6: June 16-June 24

We are working a strange schedule this week in order to participate in cave emergence counts on the weekend as well as complete our usual fieldwork. Tuesday we checked an area along the Alcovy River just a few miles from the office before heading down to Ocmulgee WMA for the remainder of the week. Although we did not find any new roosts, the swamps along the Alcovy had impressive habitat with medium-sized trees and a good number of hollows. ...

We worked in Bond Swamp on Thursday on our own, but on our way to a new place along the river we got our truck stuck in a muddy hole along a dirt road. We had to wait for a while to be pulled out, so we decided to spend the remainder of the afternoon cleaning up and going to town to buy food, bug spray and other supplies. ...

On Friday afternoon, we traveled to Albany to get keys to Flint River WMA and Mayhaw WMA to stay in for the remainder of the weekend and early next week. ... The habitat at Flint is very impressive despite what the color model suggested. We were surprised to find some of the biggest trees we have seen yet along the Flint River sloughs. Saturday night we helped Jay Scott with a cave emergence count at Chokee Creek near Albany. He taught us a method of counting bats under white light one minute out of every five minutes while videotaping the entire emergence under infrared lighting to estimate the number of bats that exit the cave overall versus the amount that exit under white light. Jay took us to Waterfall Cave and Climax Cave Sunday afternoon where we would do emergence counts on our own; Sunday night we performed another count of Chokee Creek Cave.

Monday afternoon we attempted to search Mayhaw WMA for decent habitat, but were disappointed by the overall lack of trees and young age of the few wet spots that we did find. We performed an emergence count of Climax Cave near Bainbridge on Monday night. It was an amazing experience to witness the emergence of thousands of Southeastern myotis bats at

nightfall. We both agree that it was one of the coolest things we have ever done! ... Tuesday night was a bit of a disappointment because the bats in Waterfall Cave did not emerge as normal. There was some lightning and a bit of rain nearby, and although it did not rain at the cave, we believe that local conditions caused the bats to stay in the cave.

We packed up Wednesday morning and headed home. ... We were more than ready for a break!

Week 7: June 28-July 2

This week is also a bit of a strange week: We are working Sunday through Thursday morning to allow a long weekend for the upcoming holiday. Sunday afternoon we met at Yuchi WMA to check out some potential habitat we missed when we were in the area last time. Monday we were able to check a private easement along the Savannah River. ...

Tuesday morning, we finally got to check the area we came for Fort Gordon. Two wildlife biologists accompanied us, one a Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources graduate. They were both very enthusiastic and fun to work with. On our first day at Fort Gordon we found three roosts! We found a pip (an Eastern pipistrelle) under a bridge and a Raf under a different bridge. We also found a Raf in a historic army bunker site from the Vietnam time period. The swamp areas that we checked so far were not as impressive, but we were excited nonetheless to finally see some bats! We didn't find anything else the second day at Fort Gordon, but the week was overall exciting. Before now there were no records for this county. Success!

Week 8: July 6-10

This week we worked Oliver Bridge Wildlife Management Area near Statesboro, returned to Fort Stewart and spent the end of the week near Waycross working on Dixon and Grand Bay WMAs. Oliver Bridge only had a small amount of habitat that was surprisingly along an area of the color model that didn't look promising. The small amount we found, though, had some of the biggest trees we have seen all summer.

We worked both sides of the small slough parallel to the river, but didn't find any bats. At Fort Stewart we were able to check some military bunkers that were inaccessible the last time we were there and found one new roost to add to our data. We had hoped to have a boat this time around to check some of the trees along the Canoochee River, but unfortunately the boat was out of commission.

Neither Dixon nor Grand Bay had good habitat; most of what used to be there has been logged in the past. There were some small sloughs with very young trees, but even those areas won't be decent for bats for at least another 50 to 100 years.

Next week we are getting into the really good habitat along the Ocmulgee and Altamaha rivers. We are excited to have found a new roost this week and looking forward to the upcoming habitat.

Week 9: July 13-16

This week we worked along the Ocmulgee and Altamaha where they meet at Horse Creek WMA, Flat Tub WMA and Big Hammock WMA. Monday and Tuesday we worked in Horse Creek and Flat Tub, because they are just across the river from one another. We found two new roosts on Horse Creek; both were tupelo trees that each had one Rafinesques big-eared bat. We didn't find any bats at Flat Tub, but it is a new WMA that was logged sometime before it the state took over management, and therefore doesn't have a lot of good habitat.

Wednesday and Thursday we spent at Big Hammock. We didn't find any bats Wednesday because most of our day was spent trying to get our truck out of the mud! Thursday we were able to work with Greg Nelms, a wildlife biologist for Region 6. He brought a canoe for us to use, which was very helpful along some of the deeper areas of the swamp.

We found 23 Rafinesque's bats at Big Hammock -- three bachelors each roosting alone and two maternity colonies. The week was extremely successful and equally exciting, because we finally saw bats in trees!

Week 10: July 20-24

This week was the so-called hell week that occurs in almost every field season. Nearly everything that could have gone wrong went wrong!

Monday morning our truck had a flat and was leaking fluids. So I had to drive a borrowed truck to Moody Forest Natural Area where we would be staying for the first part of the week.

Tuesday we worked some areas at Bullard Creek WMA, but did not find any bats. Most of the habitat that we could get to was minimal, and we suspect that there are better trees in places that can be accessed by the river in the coming weeks.

Wednesday we drove up to search Echeconnee Creek Natural Area and Oaky Woods WMA. We didn't find any habitat that was old enough at the natural area and found no habitat to speak of at Oaky Woods. Wednesday night, Trina and Thomas Floyd drove down to Ocmulgee WMA and brought a boat so we could work along the Ocmulgee River Thursday and Friday. Thursday morning the boat broke down, so Michael and I had to improvise a bit. We tried searching some areas along the river near Abbeville that we could get to by truck. We found some decent-sized trees, but the area was not very dense and we didn't see any bats.

Thursday night we drove down to Dixon WMA so we could work at Banks Lake National Wildlife Refuge on Friday, because we had a feeling that the boat wouldn't be fixed on time. Banks Lake was a really cool area with lots of cypress trees, but they were all really young and without cavities.

This week obviously didn't go so well, but next week we will be floating along the Altamaha River with Trina, Nikki Castleberry and Jason Wisniewski doing bat work and mussel work. It should be exciting!

Week 11: July 26-31

Monday morning I met up with Jason and Nikki to drive to Darien to borrow a boat for the week and then head to Moody Forest where we would be staying. In the meantime, Michael went to Hatch nuclear power plant where he found one new roost.

On Tuesday the four of us along with Alison McGee from the Nature Conservancy went mussel grubbing in three areas of the Altamaha where Jason wanted to search for spiny mussels.

Grubbing -- searching for mussels by hand -- was a totally new experience for Michael and myself. It was fun to learn something new, and especially exciting when we found seven spiny mussels.

Trina drove down with our truck Tuesday night, and Dirk Stevenson met us at Moody to trap bats. We caught an evening bat in a mist net and returned to the cabins to get some rest for Wednesday. On Wednesday, we returned to the river where Dirk joined us again. We searched the Murff Tract (officially the Rayonier Forest Resources Tract) and found three new roosts, two of which were in cypress trees. It was nice to finally find cypress trees that were suitable!

We were also able to watch Dirk in herpetologist mode as he caught several frogs, two snakes and a salamander. Thursday we searched along the parts of Bullard Creek that we could not access the first go-around. We were very excited to find eight Rafs in seven trees. I knew they were there somewhere!

Thursday night I had to return home, but Michael stayed with the crew to continue searching. They did not find any new roosts on Friday, but overall the week was very successful. We have found nearly 40 bats in trees this summer and several more in various other places. Let's hope it continues next week in our last few days in the field.

Week 12: Aug. 3-5

This week is our last week and also a short week. We were expecting to return to the Ocmulgee River with Thomas and his boat, but the boat is still out of commission. Instead, Jason and Trina let us borrow their kayaks to use along the river.

Monday and Tuesday we paddled upstream from different boat ramps looking for decent habitat we had permission to check. Unfortunately, the boat ramps in this area are very spaced out and in order to travel downstream between ramps we would have had to kayak at least 10 miles or more (depending on the ramps) on top of getting out of the water to walk transects. We found a couple of areas with decent trees by water and even tried finding permission points by road.

We didn't find any bats, but we were not surprised because the habitat was not ideal in comparison to past weeks. Having a boat may have helped cover more area, but we did what we could.

Wednesday we cleaned out the truck, gathered all of our supplies and prepared to return all of our materials to Trina. Michael will be putting together ArcView shapefiles from the entire summer soon, and we will all be combining and sharing our pictures with each other. Next week, we will be traveling to Missouri with Trina and Nikki to attend the annual Bat Blitz. I can't wait to see what it's all about!

All in all, I'd say this summer was successful, as well as a great learning experience. We found bats under bridges, in historical military bunkers, in trees and in bat boxes, and we had the unique opportunity to witness thousands of bats emerge from caves. It was a long, hot summer with plenty of biting insects, snakes, gators, dehydration and fatigue, but it was well worth it to be a part of an important conservation project. This will surely be a summer that we will both remember for the rest of our lives!