Researchers net rare Spotted bats near Lillooet

BY MATTHEW ROBINSON, VANCOUVER SUN DECEMBER 30, 2014

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Photograph by: Submitted, Jared Hobbs

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The bats are numbered among fewer than 20 ever caught in Canada, and are among an estimated population of fewer than 1,000 in the country, according to a news release by staff at the Fish and Wildlife Compensation Program.

The scientists caught the winged mammals in a mist net — a nearly invisible, in-air mesh fence that biologists use to safely snag and tag birds and bats. The intention of the biologists' work is to learn more about the ecology of Pallid, Spotted and other related bat species in the area before White Nose Syndrome — a deadly fungal disease sweeping westward through North America — reaches B.C.

"Finding six spotted bats in one night, and seven in total this field season, is beyond our expectations," said Jared Hobbs, a biologist with research firm Hemmera.

Spotted bats are large, but they don't weigh much. They have a wingspan of more than 30 centimetres, but weigh just 15 grams — about the weight of a compact disc. They have the biggest ears of any B.C. bat and are recognizable for the white spot on each of their shoulders and on their rump, according to the Government of Canada's Species at Risk registry. The hunting calls of spotted bats can be heard

by the human ear, according to the release.

Cori Lausen, who co-leads the project with Hobbs, said spotted bats are not easily captured. As a result, relatively little is known about the species.

The bats are so hard to capture that it was not until 1979 that biologists discovered the species lived in the province, according to the B.C. Ministry of Environment.

"These bats are high-flying, so we used mist nets that were four times the height of those typically used, measuring about 12.5 metres high by 18 metres wide, and we focused on open grassland habitats," said Lausen.

After netting their subjects, the researchers glued radio telemetry tags onto the backs of the bats so they can track their foraging and roosting habits.

White Nose Syndrome has killed millions of hibernating bats since spreading from the northeastern to central U.S. and Canada, according to the U.S. Geological Survey. Bat populations have declined by an estimated 80 per cent since the syndrome was first documented in winter 2006-07, according to the USGS and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. In some areas, 90 to 100 per cent of hibernating bat populations have died off as a result of the fungus.

The syndrome has not been detected in this province, but many biologists say it's only a matter of time until it spreads.

The biologists' work is being funded by the Fish and Wildlife Compensation Program, a partnership between BC Hydro, First Nations, the federal and provincial governments and others, according to the release. The project is one of eight in the Bridge and Seton River watersheds that are receiving funding from the program in 2014-15.

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