

As volunteers went underground at the weekend in search of one of the region's endangered species, The Border Watch reporter ANELIA BLACKIE crawled along for some insight into the project.

Bats on brink of extinction



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CLIMBING down dangling ladders and crawling through small openings in dark caves has helped me realise how important it has become to protect the critically endangered Southern Bent-wing Bat.

Joining cave and bat experts, along with community volunteers, last Saturday in their second annual survey of the furry little creature, I learned about the fate of this intriguing mammal.

For many people, bats are associated with blood sucking vampires and they may not be on everyone's list of favourite animals.

But they do play a major role in controlling insect numbers - a role only someone who enjoys the buzzing noise of a mosquito can dismiss as unimportant.

The survey was organised by Department of Environment and Heritage threatened fauna ecologist Ronald Bonifacio, who gathered seven teams to count and photograph bats in caves, and report on habitat observations that may help to prevent this species from disappearing forever.

There are about 30,000 Southern Bent-wing Bats in the wild, which may sound like a lot, but becomes alarming when considering that about 250,000 were inhabiting our caves in 1967.

While crawling through the caves, bat enthusiast Ian Lewis explained how white settlement in the region had contributed to the dramatic decline.

The draining of swamp areas for farming, which led to a decline in insect numbers, coupled with the use of pesticides, found by researchers in bat guano, were two contributors.

However, the continuing destruction of their habitat



DELICATE: The Southern Bent-wing Bat is easily distinguished from other bat species by its long third finger, which folds back, creating a distinctive "bent wing" appearance. Their delicate wings are easily torn when they become entangled in branches or rubble people dump into the openings of their caves.

could still be the most alarming cause of their decline.

"Last year, when I went to caves near Mount Shank, I could not find one of the six entrances to the caves and when I investigated I found that the entire cave system was filled in and ploughed over by farmers," Mr Lewis said.

"The caves, in which about 1000 bats were living, were no longer there."

A lot of work is being done to educate and encourage farmers to protect caves on their properties, but those who are not taking it seriously are not the only culprits to blame.

When our team reached a cave system on Forestry SA land at Snake Hill, we found a warning sign at the opening of the caves urging people not to enter as the caves were used by the critically endangered bat to hibernate during winter.

These signs were clearly ignored by some members of the public.

Inside the caves we found the walls were spray-painted with graffiti.

One of the other teams, led by Mr Bonifacio, found a family of four exploring one of the caves.

"It was a difficult situation to be in because how do you tell parents in front of their children that they are trespassing," Mr Bonifacio said.

In a briefing before our expedition, Mr Bonifacio explained how important it was for us to keep disturbance of the bats to an absolute minimum.

During winter, bats enter torpor or hibernation - a state where they allow their body temperature to drop, thereby reducing metabolism and energy use.

If disturbed, they may fall to the floor or try to fly.

However, before they can fly, bats need to raise their core body temperature, which they can only achieve by burning fat reserves.

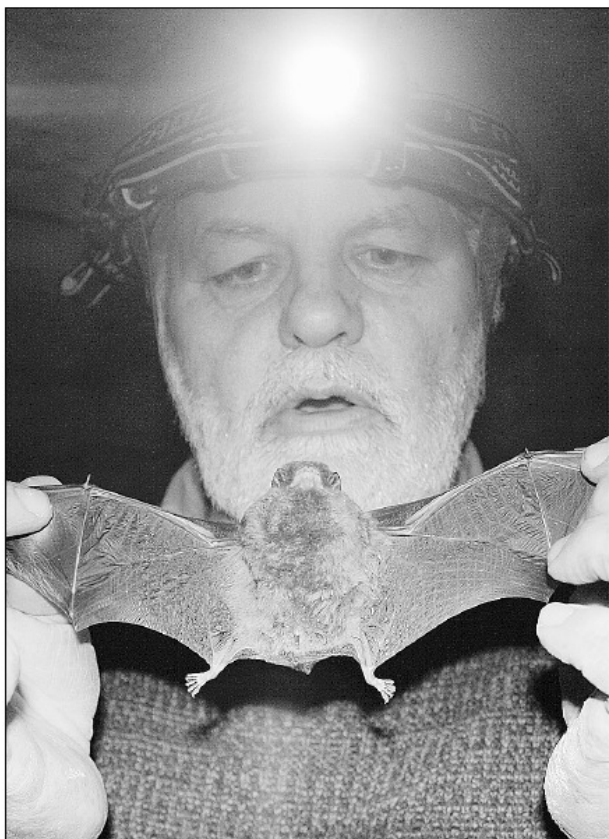
This is obvious as the bats shake visibly, giving the appearance of being nervous, but they are in fact burning important fat reserves, which can be fatal.

In late August, the bats leave their winter sites to gather in two breeding sites - the Naracoorte Caves and Starlight Cave in western Victoria.

Here the adult females will give birth to a single pup between October and January.

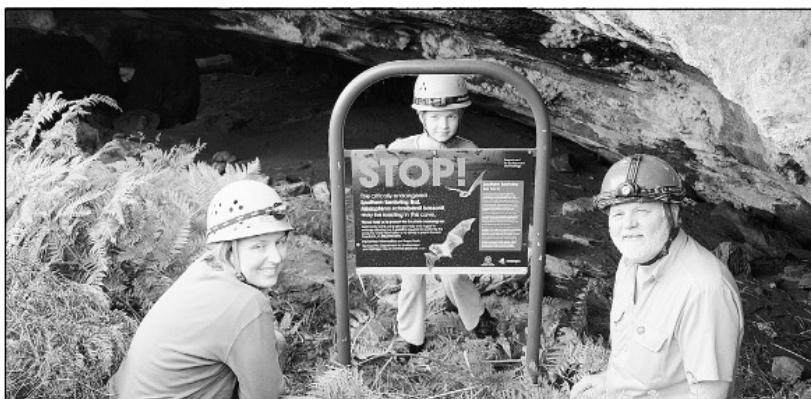
While Mr Bonifacio is still awaiting final count results from western Victorian, this year's Southern Bent-wing Bat population in the South East was estimated at less than 15,000.

Although numbers are an important part of the survey, other observations, such as human interference in the caves, will play an important role in plans to attempt to save the Southern Bent-wing Bat from extinction.



FACING EXTINCTION: Cave expert and bat enthusiast Ian Lewis inspects the health of one of the critically endangered Southern Bent-wing Bats during an annual survey held last Saturday. The survey plays an important role in plans to save the furry creature from extinction.

Pictures: ANELIA BLACKIE.



IGNORING THE SIGNS: Heidi Hessling (left), Dale Bachmann and Ian Lewis inspect a sign warning people to stay out of the cave system where the critically endangered Southern Bent-wing Bat hibernate during winter. Graffiti inside the caves proves that the signs are being ignored.



SIZE DOES NOT MATTER: The insectivorous Southern Bent-wing Bat may be small in size, but it plays a major role in controlling insect numbers.