

Bat boxes sustainable alternative to spraying

by Megan Byrnes

People seeking a sustainable alternative to mosquito spraying and poisons to prevent the spread of West Nile virus can consider a bat box as an effective and environmentally friendly solution.

The specter of West Nile virus has many Pennsylvania communities considering chemical pest control measures, such as spraying and introducing larvicides into standing water. These chemicals are allegedly safe for use and are proven effective. "Most of our pest control is in the form of a larvicide," Matt Milliron, community water systems program coordinator for the Centre County Planning Office, stated in an interview, "and this will inhibit the growth of the mosquitoes before they even hatch."

Milliron said that spraying for West Nile virus has occurred approximately once every two years, and only when trap counts were high. Mosquito traps, which are set around local parks and wooded areas throughout the state, are used to capture mosquitoes so that they can be tested for West Nile virus.

Spraying and larvicide programs sound good, until one reads more about the chem-

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-- Katie Ombalski

icals that are used.

Four state-approved chemicals used for insect extermination in wooded areas are pyrethroids including permethrin, dicloropropionanilides including propanil, cyclohexenones including clethodim, and Methoprene. Permethrin has been assessed by the United States Department of Agriculture and ETOXNET through the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture and is considered safe for use in larvicides. However, the chemical not only has an adverse effect on aquatic organisms such as trout and salmon, but also can cause eye and skin irritations in humans.

The other three chemicals have been proven to cause asthmatic breathing, sneezing, nausea and mortality in birds. These chemicals can harm other wildlife and even humans who inhale the chemicals.

Mosquitoes can be eliminated from residential yards with properly placed bat boxes. Invented by Pennsylvania Game Commission officer Cal Butchkoski, the

bat box is one of the most environmentally friendly pest control methods available. Because these boxes provide comfortable roosting sites, in time the hungry bats multiply, keeping harmful insects such as mosquitoes and flies away from vulnerable homeowners and eliminating the need for municipal spraying in residential areas.

Devouring as many as 30 million insects per summer and 1,200 insects per hour, a boxful of native Pennsylvania bats can decrease the mosquito population and thus the threat of West Nile virus.

"I don't think many people know that building a bat box is an option, or that they will get an immediate response from the bats," ClearWater Conservancy conservation biologist Katie Ombalski said in an interview.

Building a bat box is relatively simple, and requires only five cuts to one plank of wood 150mm wide and 25 mm thick. The sizes of the cuts may vary depending on the desired dimensions of the finished box. The

five cross-cuts yield two sides, the back, the front and the roof, which is generally applied at a slant.

The Pennsylvania Game Commission suggests roughening the back of the box with a handsaw or creating slats inside the box to provide gripping surfaces. The PGC also recommends placing the bat box at least 5 feet above the ground and 10 feet away from walking trails or populated areas.

Bat boxes are also commercially available at most wildlife/feed stores and through online wildlife supply Web sites in such styles as the "Heartwood bat lodge," the "Victorian bat haven" and the "Bat Bungalow."

ClearWater Conservancy held the organization's first bat box workshop in early September to spread awareness of bat ecology and to inform the public of bats' taste for mosquitoes.

Pennsylvania state parks, along with the Pennsylvania State Game Commission, have been hosting a number of informative sessions and hands-on field trips in order to dispel common stereotypes and raise awareness of bats' positive contributions to the environment and public health.



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