CENTRAL OKLAHOMA GROTTO
OF THE NATIONAL SPELEOLOGICAL SOCIETY,INC

C.O.G.nizance

Inside this Issue

Announcements ……..……...……...…....2
Minutes……...……..……...……...…..…2
Treasurer's Report ……..……...……...…....3
Trip Reports ……..……...……...…....3
Jester Cave Bat Count; by Dave McDermott……..…..…… 3-5
Jester Bate Count, March 1, 2008; by Duane Del Vecchio 5-6
Selman Bat Count, Feb. 23, 2008 by Duane Del Vecchio ….. 6-8

Picture report on line at: http://okcavers.com

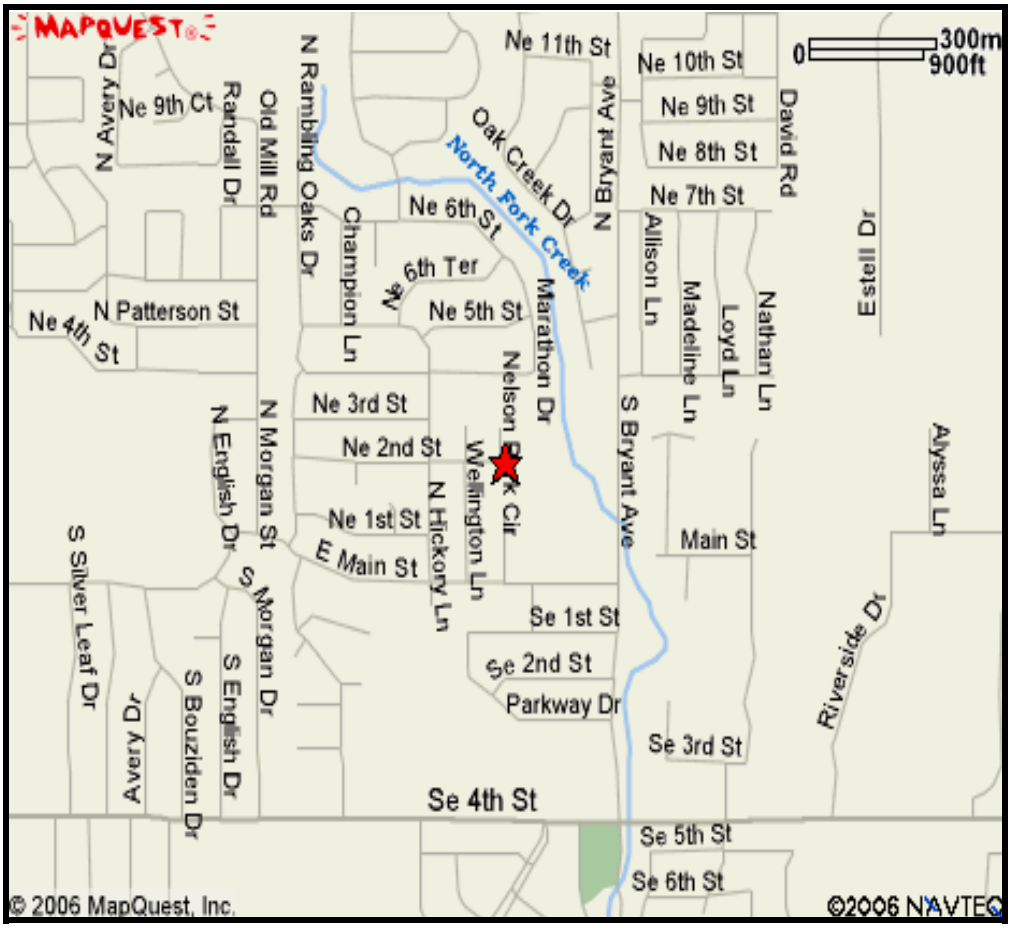
Potpourri
Rubaiyat of the Frozen Bat Count, poem bv Steve Beleu ……. 9
Why are thousands of bats dying in New York?
Copied from the Associated Press ……9
The Goofiest Questions; Cartoon by Sue Bozeman…..…..…10

The March meeting of the Central Oklahoma Grotto will be held at 7:30, Friday, March 10, 2008 at the home of Dale Amlee.

Address: 308 Nelson Park Circle, Moore, OK:

Telephone: 405-735-6143

Directions coming from North coming down highway 35: take exit at South 4th street in Moore, taking 4th street Eastbound (right turn at top of ramp). If coming from South hwy 35, same exit, but road loops beneath 4th street so a left turn will be needed to get you onto eastbound 4th street. Continue east on 4th street past RR tracks, past Eastern Ave., continue about 1 mile more until you reach Bryant Ave (no stop sign), take a left turn (North) onto Bryant. Go about two blocks until you reach the first stop sign, which is Main street, make a left turn. Go West on Main street two blocks until you reach Wellington, make a right turn. Go North on Wellington one long block until N. 2nd street, turn right. Then a quick left onto Nelson Park Circle. Green/brick house on right side of cul-de-sac.



For the adventurous of spirit who refuse to follow perfectly good directions (most of you, if memory serves) you can also exit off of 35 onto Main street in Moore and follow it straight into my neighborhood. Coming from the north, though, in order to find Main Street you will need to take a very early exit ramp that removes you from the highway long before 12th street and follow the frontage road for an additional mile to get to Main Street. Once on Main, continue it due East into my neighborhood, finding Wellington Ave. From Wellington, turn left, go one long block to N. 2nd street, turn right, then a quick left onto Nelson Park Circle. Green/brick house on right side of cul-de-sac.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

*Northwest trips are scheduled the third Saturday of every month. Contract Sue or John Bozeman for details.

* The March Friday, 9th, 2008 meet will be held at 7:30 in the evening at the home of the Amlees. The address is 308 Nelson Park Circle, Moore, OK. His phone number is 405-4-735-6143.

MINUTES

CENTRAL OKLAHOMA GROTTO

Minutes of the meeting of February 8, 2008

Host: the home of John Van Dyke
Attendees: Dale Amlee, Anne Ault, Sue and John Bozeman, Duane Del Vecchio, Mark Miller, John Talbot, Lil and Dale Town, Jon and Kelley Woltz, S Beleu. Guests: Taber Halford, Brad Scoggin.

Vice-Chairman Amlee began the meeting at 8:27; Chairman Woltz came in late, but deferred the chairmanship to Mr. Amlee.

OLD BUSINESS

We had to change the date of our annual pilgrimage to Carlsbad Caverns to a time other than the first weekend of June at the request of NPS cave management. We chose the date of April 26 over June 28.

We have yet to receive any further information about the invertebrate collecting that we did for Dr. Graening over these last few months.

John Bozeman noted that we need at least one more photograph of Broken Horn Cave for the next issue of *Oklahoma Underground.*

NEW BUSINESS

We planned the February bat count.

I proposed that we rename the "63rd Street Shelter Cave," which recently deceased former COG member David Kowalski surveyed as if it were an actual cave--it's no more than a rock overhang beside a highway--as "Kowalski Cave" to memorialize him. We voted to do so.

TREASURER'S REPORT

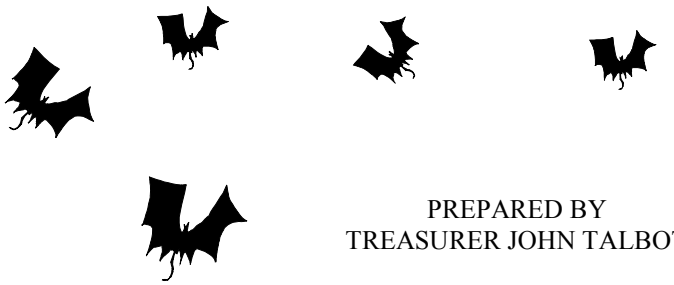
John Talbot gave his report.

We got it over with at 8:57.

TREASURER'S REPORTS

February, 2008

INCOME		EXPENSES	
DIVIDEND	$ 7.49	PRINTING PUBLICATION	$174.41
TOTALS	**$ 7.49**		
$174.41			
CASH ON HAND	$ 100.54		
CHECKING	$ 421.21		
SAVINGS	$ 2,661.06		
TOTAL FUNDS AS OF 2/05/08	**$ 3,190.08**		



PREPARED BY
TREASURER JOHN TALBOT

TRIP REPORTS

Location: Jester Cave System
Entrances: South Entrance (resurgence), North Entrance (Glade and Homestead)
Date: Saturday – Mar. 1, 2008
Participants: Duane Del Vecchio, John Talbot, Lil Town, John & J.T. VanDyke, and guest: Dave McDermott
Report by: Dave McDermott

Let's see, where do I start? I guess, I will start how and why I got myself into the situation of actually crawling around in a cave for the purpose of counting bats. Duane and I sit next to each other at work and I always thought it was pretty interesting when he talked about going "caving", but this weekend added another aspect to the this term, bats! I am always ready to try something once (well except food), so I asked Duane if I could come along. He got a big smile and said "sure, and you don't have to worry about any type of equipment, I have it all".

So the next step, tell the wife what I am planning on doing this weekend. "Bats!!" was the first word out of her mouth, the second was "Why?". You will have to imagine the rest of our conversation.

Friday comes and it is now time to stop by Duane's house to pick up some equipment. However, first things are first, so I ask Duane if he wants to have a beer. Guess what, he is out! The garage frig was empty. For those of you who know Duane this is unbelievable. How rude (big smile). I was shocked, I almost fainted. Next Duane breaks out his large plastic storage box of goodies and provides me a caving helmet equipped with a light, an extra flash light, one MORE light, and most importantly some knee pads. Not that I am a baby or anything, but crawling around on rough gypsum on my bare knees, was not my idea of fun. Duane also gave me a listing of things at should bring (small back pack, extra change of clothes, a couple of snacks, water, my camera, and to dress in layers because the cave temperature will be a lot cooler than the daytime temperature). He told me that the number one rule in caving, everything has to be in three's, three lights, three people in a cave together, three people must know where you are, etc. So, do I bring three pair of underwear? I might just need them.

Well Saturday morning arrives. I am up at the crack of dawn. Two hours before Duane is going to arrive. So I have plenty of time to load up the truck, which takes all of five minutes. We have to take my truck because Duane's broke his last weekend. I wonder what could be in store for my truck. Next, time for the paper and some coffee. The entire time I am drinking this coffee I am thinking to myself, "What happens when I am in a cave and I have to relieve myself?". Well I will have to cross that path if and when I have too. Duane arrives right on time, we load up; stop by the local "stop and rob" for another coffee and cappuccino, and start heading to Altus to pick up Lil. Along the way I have 5,072 questions for Duane. Everything from "What do I do if the bats start flying?" to "Do they bite?" but, like a good trooper, he answer them all and it really makes for a quick trip to Altus.

We arrive in Altus way to early, so a stop at Burger King for breakfast and a bathroom break are in order, but guess what, more coffee. Once finished with breakfast, we head to Dale and Lil's house. Dale has other obligations today, but his wife Lil was fired up and ready to go. I almost cried when we walked up the drive way. A beautiful Honda Goldwing was sitting in the garage along with Lil's bike. My wife and I are also motorcycle enthusiast so we had a lot to talk about. I could tell right off the bat (no pun intended) that Dale and Lil were seasoned cavers and bat counters, because she drug out a large plastic storage box, just like Duane's and started picking stuff out of it that she wanted to take with her, but eventually decides to just take the entire box.

After getting everything loaded in the back of the truck and a few motorcycle stories behind us, we head North, then West, then North, then West, then I am a lost! However, Duane and Lil know right where we are going. So I ask where are we going? Duane responds with "the T". Great… "the T", whatever the heck that means. Shortly I find out. It is an intersection in the middle of… well, know where actually. I park the truck, grab some fresh air and a mouth full of seeds. For those of you who don't know me very well I love taking pictures about as much as Duane loves his beer. So I am out taking pictures of everything that I could find of interest while we wait for John, John, and JT. Great, two John, easy to remember, but hard to get their individual attention, so I go with "sir" the rest of the afternoon and it works out fine.

(Continued on page 4)

Another vehicle soon approaches from the South, I know this direction because of the sun rising out of the East is now starting to warm things up, I guess being a Cub Scout paid off after all. John, John, and JT (I am not sure of his age, but I would guess he is 10) arrive and everyone starts gearing up. Not too long after that we are headed to my first cave. I will not go into all the names of the caves that we visited because frankly I don't remember, but they were all very interesting and were named by the person that discovered them many moons ago.

So, here is my first experience with real "cave" people, but for some reason they do not look like the cavemen on TV (big smile). My first thought as we are walking down the dirt road for a couple of hundred yards was "What am I doing?", "What happens when the cave collapses on our heads?", "When was my last rabies shot?" Funny how things go through you head when you face something that you have never faced in the past. But, it all worked out, I put on my caving helmet, turned on my light, and walked right on in.

I am thinking to myself, this is very interesting. You could immediately feel the temperature drop and darkness surround you. It only took about 50 feet before we find our first bat. Actually this is not the first time that I have ever been in a cave or seen a bat before. Before I retired from the Army I was stationed in Kentucky for a couple of years and Corby (my wife) and I visited almost every cave that had a "public" tour in it, but this time it was different, there was no colored lights, no paths to walk on, no guild telling us what is going on around us. Just the six of us knowing deep down inside that we only had each other to depend on if something goes wrong. I think that is a lot of trust to put in someone and is often overlooked by seasoned cavers. Not that the caves were that hard to maneuver around in, but just the fact that something could happen, at any moment.

Everyone made me feel right at home, I was quickly taught the difference between a Pip, a Long Ear, and a regular cave bat, what the packing rate was and what it means. It was not long before I was calling out counts between the flashes of my camera trying to get every angle that I could of a bat hanging from ceiling.

For the first 20 minutes or so I stayed dry, but it was inevitable that sooner or later I had to get wet. The water was cold at first, but my body quickly adjusted to it. I only had to get wet up to my knees, but there is no feeling like water soaked socks and the water squishing between your toes. Everyone else was wet to, and there was no complaining from anyone, it was just part of caving, per Duane.

While counting bats that day in different caves around the area, two things really stick out in my mind that happened to me. First, Duane, Lil and I, were counting a particular part of the cave. I had the right side, Duane the left, with Lil doing the recording. I came across a opening in the wall on my side so big that I could walk into it. I asked Duane (I always asked someone permission before doing anything, I did not want to do anything wrong) if I should follow the path and see if there are any bats in there. I got the okay from Duane, so I start walking in. I followed the path for a good ways, far enough that I could no longer see the lights from Lil and Duane's helmets, then all off a sudden, right in front of me a bat falls off the wall and starts flight towards me. I did not jump or move, but it sure startled me. My heart started pounding and it took a few seconds for me to calm down. We had bats flying around us out in the main chamber and it did not bother me, but I guess being alone, the only light coming from my helmet, really changed my awareness of my surroundings. It felt alone and when the bat jumped it I was actually scared for a few seconds.

Second, as the day wore on we were in a large cave which contained a great number of bats, all packed together, I am calling out numbers, Lil is writing then down, we are leap frogging the John's and JT, and all of a sudden I hear a sound that I have not heard before. A loud screeching sound that sounded like it was coming from thousands of bats. I am thinking to myself, "Were we to noisy?" "Did we wake them up?" "Do we have to go through that room?". You guessed it, we had to go into that room and count

"Do we have to go through that room?

them. I really did not know what was going too happened so I did whatever new caver does, let someone else go first, so JT jumped up front and head right on in. There was no way was going to let a 10 year old show me up so I headed in right behind him. The first thing that I noticed was that there was not as many bats as I thought and there was not that many flying around. It is impossible to count that number because you only see them when they cross the path of you light source. They were just being noisy, talking to each other, probably telling tales about how many bugs they got from the night before. So what started out as something that really worried me, again turned out to be another fascinating sight.

The day ended too quickly and it was time to pack up and head to a friend's house that lived nearby to change clothes real quick before we headed to Blair and visit Luigi's restaurant. About half way there, I had

(Continued on page 5)

to pass Duane a rag for his mouth (he was drooling) because he could hardly wait to bite into the best calzone in the world. Just kidding, he was not drooling, but he sure was looking forward to it. Lil's husband, Dale, met us there and we had a wonderful dinner. After ordering our food, water, and a beer, I headed to the bathroom to wash off the bat poop from my hands. When I got back I had my beer in front of me, but one thing was wrong, it was empty. I asked the waitress if she knew that she had brought me empty beer. She had this big bewildered look on face for a few seconds and swore to me that it was a full beer when it arrived. Come to find out, Duane downed his, then downed mine, and waited for me to return. It got a good laugh out of us all. The joke was on me…

After dinner we all loaded up in the truck, dropped Lil off in Altus, and Duane and I headed back to Cache where I live to pick up Duane baby truck that he left at my house. All in all I have to say that I had a wonder experience. Something that I would do again, that is for sure and I owe it to Duane's comradeship and the great friends that I meet that day. Thanks again Duane, Lil, John, John, and JT!

Jester Bat Count

Location: Jester Cave System
Entrances: South Entrance (resurgence), North Entrance (Glade and Homestead)
Date: Saturday – Mar. 1, 2008
Participants: Duane Del Vecchio, John Talbot, Lil Town, John & J.T. VanDyke, and guest: Dave McDermott
Report by: Duane Del Vecchio
Picture report on line at: http://okcavers.com

Two weeks later than usual, the SW Bat count can take place! First weather and then scheduling kept all from doing it at its traditional time. This trip Duane brought a guest from his work, the Lawton Public School webmaster Dave McDermott. He's heard D talk about the caves and bats, as they share the office space, so he had to see what's up! We left Lawton and headed for Altus to pick up Lil. We got to see Dale Town who had to go mountain climbing to replace a repeater before the bad weather season begins. (He has to talk to his weather spotters!). Then all three of us headed for Jester Cave in Dave's truck (D's car was still broken from last bat count).

We got there early at the "T" in the road and were awaiting the two Johns. Talbot and VanDyke (and son) were driving in from the city to do today's count. When they arrived we started our hike to the southern entrance of Jester. Surprise… no lock on the gate, but it was so dry that we didn't want to burn the whole county down with a hot catalytic converter so we walked anyway. We had a pretty strong south wind but the temps were already in the 60's at 11 a.m. We got situated in the Jessie James room and began counting.

The cave was pretty warm with the air temp near 50 but water down near 40. With six we had enough for two teams but the first part is typically not too packed with bats that we would efficiently be able to leap frog over each other with the counts. Dave was learning the ropes, J.T. was eagerly counting (with backup from dad) and John taking notes. That left D to finally get some pictures for the website!! Bats were in about the same places but seemed to be smaller groups and mats than usual. It's been quite a warm winter so maybe they all moved up to Kansas to sleep! <grin>

We worked our way though and ended up in the area where you are going to get wet one way or another. Most people take the high road and find the mud bank on the left and crawl to the dome and over to the side dry tunnel that leads to what I call Pip Hall. That water section we found 16 dead bats in a row in the water. Each was on the bottom about a foot apart from each other. Hope this is not the prelude to the mass dying that is happening up in the Northeast. Something is killing the bats with a white fungus around their nose and mouth (maybe they are cocaine addicts!). It was very strange seeing that many dead in a place we MIGHT see one dead in the past. (a side note: if you go to the web, look at picture #16… is that water condensation or white on those bats snouts?

Taken in the same area as the water picture).

(Continued on page 6)

We the headed up Pip Hall and got our pip counts in. While in this area, it was noticed that some of the cave popcorn had been chiseled off of the ceiling. Where the water was dripping through a crack and creating an long string of mini-popcorn, someone very recently had taken a chisel shaped device and chipped the stuff off of the wall. The marks were fresh and were not as wet or dirty as the wall surrounding them indicating that this was recent. The sad thing is, though this looks pretty in the cave, it's pretty ugly outside and turns to dust once it dries up. Sigh….

Chiseled off popcorn from ceiling.

We took a small break and then headed back out of this part of the cave. The bats were really starting to get active and flying about so we got out of there as soon as we could. Then hiked back to the car, had a snack, and then headed for Train Tunnel entrance.

We do Train Tunnel for the long ear count. And we were able to get one (and lots of pictures of it!) so it wasn't a total bust! Pretty dry in the tunnel though. Then out and back to the cars to drive 500 feet and park so we can hike to the northern entrance (Glade).

Wow! Landscape re-take! If you're a regular to Jester you know about the dang Mesquite trees that try to tear your arm off with their thorns. Well, no more worry! EVERYONE of them is gone! It's a GIANT pasture now! Some machine did a heck of a job tearing them all up and shredding them to little tiny pieces. It really does look different!! We finally got to Glade entrance and entered with Dave and me going down the side shoot to Homestead entrance to see if any big ears are hiding in that area. We found a dead prairie rattlesnake and a very strong skunk smell, but were safe. The back rooms where the long ears typically hang out now have light at the back of their little cave. New breakdown in two areas has the previous dark back rooms practically bathed in light! Not much more time for that small area to totally collapse me thinks! But we did find three long ears in a small niche sound asleep!

Back to the main cave and D, Lil, and now experienced bat counter Dave started the leap frog process and moved ahead of John, John, and J.T. The mats were much smaller than the past and the packing rate was dismal compared to past years. We should be a couple of thousand short this year (but we'll wait for official counts). By doing the leapfrog we finished pretty quickly and were out of the cave by 3:00 p.m. coming out to an awesome 80 degree day! Wow!!. We drove and visited with Jim over at his place in the country and then all headed to Blair for a feast at Luigi's! Ahhh…worth it all right there! -ddv08-

---

Selman Bat Count Trip Report

Location: Selman Cave Complex
Entrances: Square Sink, Skylight, Oooh Aaah
Date: Saturday – Feb. 23rd
Participants: John Bozeman, Duane Del Vecchio, Mark Hunsinger
Report by: Duane Del Vecchio
Picture report on line at: http://okcavers.com

Having had to cancel the weekend before for bat count both in NW and SW corners due to bad weather, we rescheduled for the trip this weekend. Nobody but Duane and Mark Miller were available for SW so we had a no go. Checking with Sue and company, they said they probably could use help up NW at the Selman count. So off north we go!

Clear weather turned gradually cloudier and colder after I-40 to a rain and rain mist upon arrival at Betty's. Coming over just for the bat count were

Becky and Mark Hunsinger.

(Continued on page 7)

Along with Sue and John, I made five and waited for Jon "I love to sleep late" Woltz.

We visited a bit and then decided that Duane, John, and Mark go ahead and start their part of the count while Sue and Becky wait for Jon. We loaded Duane's white bat mobile and headed out just as Jon was pulling in.

We found the gate unlocked leading to the well pad and opened it and drove on in. The road was really rutted in places and D found out real fast that rutted roads mean a high crown in the middle as about 800 feet from the well head, he scraped bottom and took out an 'Iceberg" rock (that's a rock that had a little bit sticking out of the mud but was a giant underneath!).

Found out later that the out of the ground rock got stuck on the mudguard under the car and came and with no room with the ruts, just decided to take out everything from the mud guard back to the rear of the car. The participants in the car felt a bump and then a not too right sound from something bumping under the car afterwards. As it was wet and muddy, we ended up driving to the well to park anyway and then look and see what was what. When we got there, we found a nice one by one foot box that was lying on the ground held in place by a mass of wires about the size of a big toe. It l looked like the rubber grommets that held it in place gave way. We decided to mess with it later as there were bats to count!!!

We headed out to Square Sink entrance and after just about falling into the pit and getting strangled by the grapevine we were able to head on in. It was definitely warmer in the cave. We had not gotten 50 feet in when we met a professor from UCO and some high school kids he was leading though. We saw them a total of three times during the day. We really wanted to show Mark a Big Brown but alas, none were to be found this time. It felt like we didn't have as many this year doing the count. The mats were fewer and smaller but we'll wait for the "official" adding of the numbers to see for sure.

We worked down the arm from Square Sink and ended up at White Mountain where the cave splits into 3 arms…one the way we came, one toward Betty's Chair room and one toward Skylight Entrance. The temperature of the room dropped close to 10 degrees and we finally had mats instead of individuals. Duane was keeping book as John and Mark counted. We worked down toward Skylight from White Mountain. Then back and started on the arm to Betty's

Chair. In this wing, the bats were much more active. John notice that a good amount seemed to be mating. (told you they were active!) <grin> We worked our way down to the water level below Betty's chair and saw our first Pip followed by the only other one we

(Continued on page 8)

would find. We finished that wing and went back toward Skylight to meet with the backside of Oooh Aaah. We found a few bats had fallen and one set still mating while on the floor. A good amount of bats were starting to fly so we got on out of there.

We entered the crawl to get into Oooh Aaah and it was fairly dry (for a mud bank that is usually quite wet). Very few bats in Oooh Aaah and hardly any water this round. We wound and wound and wound our way though until we got the entrance and out into open air. We had told Sue and Becky that we would start another section of their count if we got out before them and to leave a note if they were there. We went to the tunnel but decided to first loo Duane's car while it was still light! (It was about 2:30 p.m.)

Yup…there's something still hanging there. John and Mark found some scrap wire lying around the area and John and D used that (and twine) to tie that big ol' part back up to the bottom of D's car. John suggested that I go home (while it is still daylight) incase our jury rigging wore out on the way. So I packed extra scrap wire and John jumped in with me to go to Betty's so he could help if it failed along the way. Mark said he would stay with the other car (as it was his anyway!) and wait for the others.

We drove back (a lot more slowly) and sometimes a bit off of the road to make sure we didn't drag anything this time. Looked at the big ol' rock I unearthed, arrived at Betty's and looked at it and it still seemed all right. D then did a little repair job on Betty's computer and then hit the road. On the road by about 3 – 3:30 and got back home about 7:15. There was no check engine light, but we did have a sucking sound underneath where the damaged part was, but it didn't seem to hurt engine performance. Actually I got 3 mpg more going back than I did coming up! <grin> Got home and loaded the pictures on the web page just as I got a call from Becky and Company calling to see if I made it home. Sure did!!... and enjoyed the whole experience!! ddv08

Post note: *Took the car in Monday and the head mechanic put it on the rack and looked at it… found out not only had I knocked that big box off (which was the evaporator condenser) but took out everything else from that point on….. which means, there are car parts all along that little prairie road. Got a call Wednesday and the mechanic said, "Just to let you know, we're at $850 in parts and counting!" <grin> They had the schematics but couldn't tell what was where until they brought another CRV up next to it and compared and found out all the other stuff was totally gone.. a few dangling wires. No wonder the Check Engine Light never came on…. I took the sensor out too, along with the wiring array and other parts. But as of this writing, I got it back and it seems to be in good shape! Ready for my next cave experience (but a bit more careful in the field!) <grin>*

Rubaiyat of the Frozen Bat Count

Written by Steve Beleu

On a cold morning in early February
Four cavers made their yearly journey
Into the caves where they counted bats
To compile the data of scientific inquiry.

Down through mud, carefully over water
Until they found the myotis they were after
In thick mats upon the cave's ceiling.
They measured the cold with a thermometer—

Air, mud, and rock—then began to report the number
Of bats hibernating peacefully in slumber.
But the cave was so cold their fingers froze
And as they shiver, their brains lumber

And they stagger down the cave's main passage
And what is one becomes a vast assemblage
And every one-square foot mat seems ten.
Extra numbers sprawl across their reportage

So as they stumble in a painfully along
Every 100 bats became 1,000, whereupon
Their report to other caves the next day became
The Great Bat Count of Days Bygone.

Cavers of present and future still enthuse
About the one-million bats of that crew
Who as they shivered their vision multiplied
Every count they made by three and two

Because bodies and fingers and brains were frozen.
Never has such a bat count been so concise!
"One million for sure! There had to be that many!"
We mourn their bats' decline and cite their data as precise.

So arise, you frozen spelunkers, thaw yourselves out!
Bat count is over and you are now without
Any day-light hours, and must return to your beds
Where you will sleep deeply and forget all about

This day when The Great Bat Count arose
To unprecedented splendor because you froze
And data for the next 100 years cited
The Great Bat Count of cold fingers, brains, and nose.

Why are thousands of bats dying in New York?

Mysterious 'white nose syndrome' spreading at alarming rate

By Michael Hill

Copied from The Associated Press, Thurs., Feb. 14, 2008

ROSENDALE, N.Y. - Bats in New York and Vermont are mysteriously dying off by the thousands, often with a white ring of fungus around their noses, and scientists in hazmat suits are crawling into dank caves to find out why.

"White nose syndrome," as the killer has been dubbed, is spreading at an alarming rate, with researchers calling it the gravest threat in memory to bats in the U.S.

"This is definitely unprecedented," said Lori Pruitt, an endangered-species biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Bloomington, Ind. "The hugest concern at this point is that we do not know what it is."

A significant loss of bats is chilling in itself to wildlife experts. But —like the mysterious mass die-offs around the country of bees that pollinate all sorts of vital fruits and vegetables — the bat deaths could have economic implications. Bats feed on insects that can damage dozens of crops, including wheat and apples.

"Without large populations of bats, there would certainly be an impact on agriculture," said Barbara French of Bat Conservation International of Austin, Texas. White nose syndrome has afflicted at least four species of hibernating bats, spreading from a cluster of four caves near Albany last winter to more than a dozen caverns up to 130 miles away.

Alan Hicks, a wildlife biologist with the New York Department of Environmental Conservation, said he fears a catastrophic collapse of the region's bat population and is urgently enlisting experts around the country to find the cause.

It is not even clear if the fungus around the bats' noses — something scientists say they have never seen before — is a cause or a symptom. It may be a sign the bats are too sick to groom themselves, said Beth Buckles, a veterinary pathologist at Cornell University.

he die-offs could be caused by bacteria or a virus. Or the bats could be reacting to some toxin or other environmental factor. Whatever it is, afflicted bats are burning through their winter stores of fat before hibernation ends in the spring, and appear to be starving.

The Northeast has generally had mild winters in recent years. But Hicks said he doubts that is the culprit in some way, since there are no reports of large die-offs in warmer states.

Nor are there any known links between what is wiping out the bees and what is killing the bats. The cause of the bee deaths is still a mystery, though scientists are looking at pesticides, parasites and a virus not previously seen in the U.S.

Researchers said there is no evidence the mysterious killer is any threat to humans. Scientists venturing into the caves wear hazardous-materials suits and breathing masks primarily to protect the bats, not themselves.

Hicks said it is possible that a cave explorer introduced the problem in the Albany-area caves and that it spread from there. "It could have been some caver in Tanzania with a little mud on his boot and a week later he's in a cave in New York," he said.

New York officials are asking people to stay out of bat caves in case humans are unwittingly spreading the problem. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is asking people not to enter caves with gear or clothing used in any New York and Vermont cave within the past two years.

The first inkling of trouble came in January 2007, when a cave explorer spotted an unusual number of bat carcasses around the mouth of a cave in the hills west of Albany. Within a month, people in the area were calling in with reports of bats flying outside in the middle of the day.

"We didn't know anything other than bats were coming out and they were just dying on the landscape," Hicks said. "They were crashing into snow banks, crawling into wood piles and dying."

By winter's end, 8,000 to 11,000 bats were presumed dead in the four caves. The mystery affliction has spread much farther this winter.

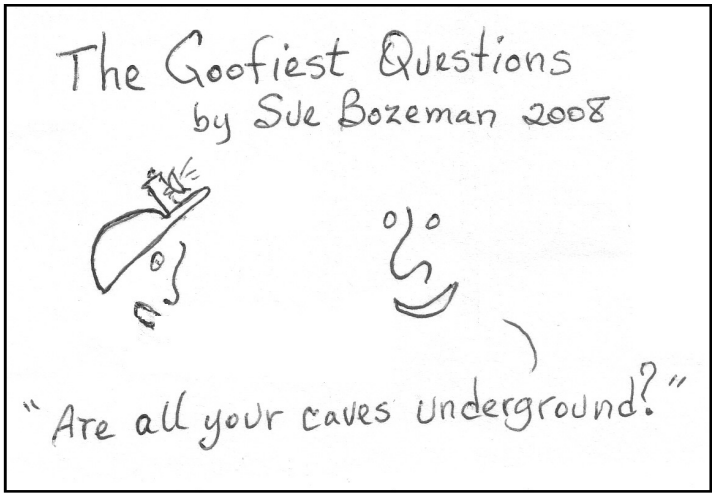
Death counts are not in yet for this winter since afflicted bats die slowly. But Hicks said there are 200,000 or more bats hibernating in caves where white nose has been detected.

Hicks recently led a team of scientists into an abandoned mine in this Hudson Valley town about 80 miles north of New York City. He directed his headlamp on a cluster of seven brown bats, smaller than mice, hanging high on the limestone wall. Four had the telltale white flecks on their muzzles.

He tapped one of the afflicted bats with a long stick, and it fell, already dead. Another groggily spread its papery wings on Hicks' gloved hand. The sickly bat was put into a cardboard takeout-soup container to be put to death and studied, since it was doomed anyway.

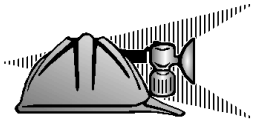
A group of Indiana bats, a federally protected endangered species, was spotted hanging lower down in the mine for cooler air, a common strategy for sick bats.

Hicks whispered grimly: "These guys are toast."



Central Oklahoma Grotto is a non-profit organization and a chapter of the NSS (National Speleological Society), Cave Avenue, Huntsville, AL., 35810. Dedicated to cave conservation and safety, C.O.G. published general information in a monthly newsletter ($6.00/year) and detailed cave surveys and related Speleological items in a yearly publication, *The Oklahoma Underground* ($3-$8/issue) Membership is by sponsor and is $12 per year for adults, $6 for spouses and students, and $3 if under 18. Central Oklahoma Grotto meets once a month on the second Friday of each month. For information, write 3208 Gettysburg Dr., Altus, Oklahoma, 73521. All submissions to the newsletter should be sent to the editor: Lil or Dale Town, 3208 Gettysburg Dr., Altus, OK 73521: Telephone: (580)477-4027: E-mail: oklmt@cableone.net. The deadline for submissions for any particular month's issue is the 20th day of the previous month. If you wish material returned. Please include a SASE with submission. All materials in this newsletter is available for reproduction, provided proper credit is given with the article when you print it. Trade publications are welcomed. *Cave softly and safely!*

Don't forget to come to the March meeting at the Amlee's, Friday, March 14.



Central Oklahoma Grotto
C/o 3208 Gettysburg Drive
Altus, Oklahoma 73521