

July 2013

FREE



The Guide

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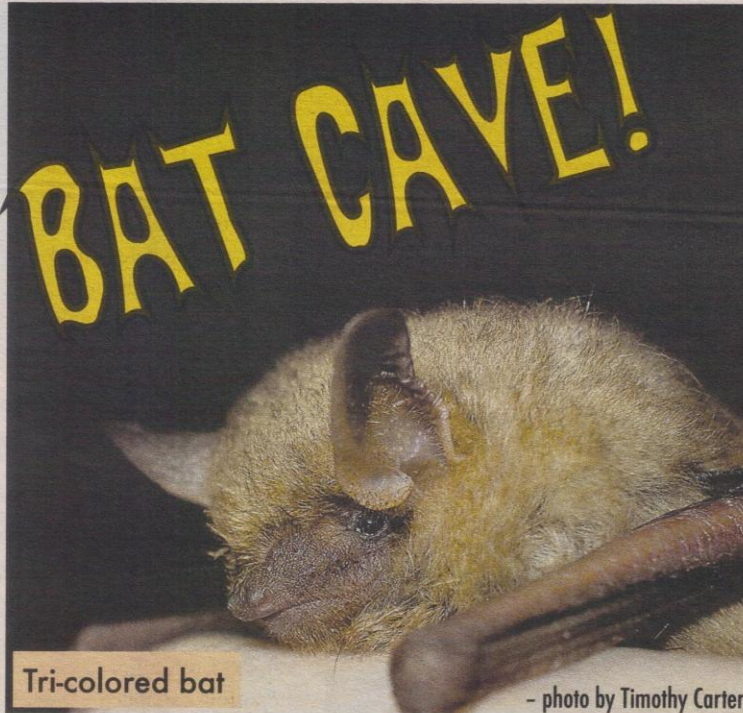
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July is brimming with things to do across Northeast Michigan



By HELEN-ANN PRINCE and DANIEL MOFFATT

special to The Guide

ROCKPORT STATE RECREATION AREA – When hibernating bats were discovered at this new state park north of Alpena, wildlife officials from Michigan’s DNR knew the rare habitat had to be protected. In response, local students, community members and Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative partners teamed up and designed a project to help conserve the bat’s winter home while serving to raise public awareness.

Rockport’s hibernaculum, to call the bat’s winter quarters by

the scientific name, is rare indeed, according to Bill Scullon, wildlife biologist with the DNR. Void of the natural caves and mine shafts that usually serve as a place for bats to hibernate, Michigan’s Lower Peninsula has only one other known bat hibernaculum and that is the

Tippy Dam in Manistee County, where 18,000-20,000 bats spend the winter.

Elsewhere in Michigan, bats must migrate to the abandoned copper mines of the western Upper Peninsula to seek seasonal shelter.

At Rockport, in addition to populations of little brown and big brown bats, biologists found a population of rare eastern pipistrelle, a declining species that is also known as

By protecting hibernating bats at Rockport State Recreation Area, Alpena students work to promote conservation and habitat restoration.

the tri-colored bat. The discovery adds to the importance of the partnership’s preservation efforts, promoting biodiversity and protecting these lesser known species important to healthy Lake Huron coastal ecosystems.

Long considered a local treasure, Rockport State Recreation Area is located on Lake Huron nine miles northeast of Alpena. Home to a limestone quarry that was decommissioned in the 1950s, the 4,237-acre historical property includes a protected deep-water harbor along with a broad range of land types and recreation opportunities.

The hibernacula are located in the abandoned quarry’s transportation tunnels – 500-foot-long by 6-foot-tall cement tubes. Mostly buried in gravel and half-full of limestone slag, each has a single opening through which the bats enter.

Rockport was designated as a state park just last year. With

the DNR Parks and Recreation division now providing management of the land, the discovery of wintering bats was quickly relayed to wildlife biologists and bat experts in the state.

The plan that officials devised creates barriers, allowing the bats to come





Serve and protect: This team of welding students from Alpena High School custom built and installed protective gates for the former transportation tunnels at Rockport State Park, allowing access to the bats while barring human entrance. The abandoned tunnels provide colonies of bats a place to hibernate and provide important habitat for the rare tri-colored bat.

and go freely while blocking public access to the man-made caverns. Both precautions are necessary for the bat's survival, as disturbance by humans and exposure to diseases can harm and even kill entire colonies. Of particular concern is white nose syndrome, a fungal

disease associated with hibernating bats. While white nose syndrome is not currently found in Michigan, the disease has killed an estimated 5 million bats in the Northeastern U.S.

Challenged by this epidemic, students and community partners answered the call to help.

Alpena High School welding students from teacher Scott

MacKenzie's class were contacted by partners within the Northeast Michigan GLSI to design and fabricate gates to protect the hibernacula.

Working with MacKenzie, John Suzsek, leader of Michigan's only 4-H welding club, has students punch in and record their day, giving students responsibility and an understanding of the schedule of a career in the welding field. By engaging students in real-world projects, they better grasp the manufacturing process from start to finish and gain the valuable experience of working in partnerships, all while benefiting their environment and community.

Even the woodshop students of Alpena High School instructor Zack Grulke became involved by making bat houses that will provide summer habitat for Rockport's bats.

This project relied on a number of different partnerships, many through the Northeast Michigan

Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative, Michigan Sea Grant, Michigan DNR, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Friends of Rockport, Huron Pines AmeriCorps and 4-H Youth Programs.

Other partners included Dr. Allen Kurta of Eastern Michigan University and the Organization for Bat Conservation, who brought a live bat presentation to Alpena for school and community education. Debunking myths, they discussed the importance of bats in our ecosystem, primarily citing the agricultural benefits of eating insects.

Though the project to help save Rockport's furry, flying denizens came together quickly, surely these gates are built to last. They were recently installed during the last week of school and will remain there to both promote the bat's presence and protect the space for future hibernating colonies. 🦇



The Northeast Michigan Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative

The Northeast Michigan Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative is a regional partnership of schools and community partners working to promote place-based, community-based learning experiences. This network serves to engage youth as partners in protecting our Great Lakes and natural resources of Northeast Michigan through hands-on, feet-wet learning in (and with) the community.

www.NEMIGLSI.org

Visit NEMIGLSI online to see projects in action & learn how *you* can participate www.NEMIGLSI.org

The NE MI GLSI supports:

- **Place-based education programs with youth:** Hands-on, place-based education is a proven method for developing knowledgeable and active stewards of the environment.
- **Educators and school improvement:** Through training and professional development for teachers, NEMI GLSI supports the use of best practices that maximize the effectiveness of PBE.
- **Strong school-community partnerships:** Schools and communities working together producing powerful partnerships that are beneficial to all.

Funding in support of the NE MI GLSI provided by Great Lakes Fishery Trust, Community Foundation for NE MI, NOAA B-WET, and Toyota 4-H20, among many other local contributing partners.

Help NE MI GLSI support youth development and environmental stewardship in our communities!

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