



# Caroline woman gives afflicted bats shelter

Digital content manager runs sanctuary out of 'sense of duty'

**Matt Steecker** Ithaca Journal | USA TODAY NETWORK

In 2007, scientists saw millions of dead bats in and out of caves.

They then discovered a disease caused by a fungus that's been around since 2006 — white-nose syndrome — was causing their deaths.

"It always gives me the shivers talking about this," said Victoria Campbell, a resident in the Town of Caroline.

Campbell runs Wild Things Sanctuary, a nonprofit based out of her home that has rehabilitated various animals, including foxes, owls, groundhogs and fawns, but mostly bats. Several of the bats are affected by white-nose syndrome. Others have injuries.

People bring bats to her from the Ithaca area as well as more distant communities, like Rochester. They are brought to her through all sorts of circumstances.

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**Victoria Campbell of Wild Things Sanctuary holds a bat in the outdoor flying house that houses many of the healthier bats before they are released back into the wild.**

PHOTOS BY KATE COLLINS/ITHACA JOURNAL

**Crow, above, was brought to Wild Things Sanctuary in Ithaca to treat a broken wing.**

# Sanctuary

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## The 'ultimate underdogs'

Recently, one individual brought in a bat that was trapped in a wooden stove. Injured bats that were hit with a tennis racket or similar item by a panicked human are often taken in.

"That's why I'm so drawn to treating them," Campbell said. "People are so mean to them. They're the ultimate underdog."

Campbell treats the bats with medication. One of the bats with an injured wing receives the same medicine Campbell receives for a bad hip, albeit at a much smaller dose.

She is legally able to treat and rehabilitate the bats because she has a state rehabilitation license, a rabies vector species rehabilitation license, and also has a federal permit to rehabilitate birds.

At any given time, Campbell keeps dozens of bats on her property. She kept 98 bats in 50 cages inside her house this past winter. Campbell transferred bats that were not ready to be released in the spring to a shelter on her property behind her house.

She now has 35 bats in care at a shelter on her property. The shelter is equipped with food and water, wooden boxes for the bats to use, and padded floors in case of crash landings. The shelter also allows insects to enter, providing another source of food for the inhabitants.

Campbell also continues to keep bats inside her house that need special attention.

## Dedicated to bats

Taking care of the bats takes up much time for Campbell, who works as a digital content manager for the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

She said that during the winter, she can spend three hours sitting on the floor while she helps young bats eat. She also has to clean up after the bats. She also writes and publishes a yearly newsletter, "The Wild Times," that she mails to her donors.

Because she devotes countless hours to these creatures, she's been averaging



**Victoria Campbell of Wild Things Sanctuary weighs a bat.**

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maining bats are able to avoid exposure to the fungus (not likely) or may develop some resistance to the fungus either due to behavioral changes (hibernation roost choice or habits) or actual physiological resistance to the disease," Hermanson wrote in an email.

He now sees big brown bats in the same location as little brown bats.

Whereas before, he would see 400 pregnant female little brown bats, he now sees 20 female big brown bats. Hermanson said it's typical for there not to be many big brown bats because they are different animals who feed on larger insects.

## The challenges of rehabilitating bats

Throughout her time running the sanctuary, Campbell has seen several bats die.

"It's not fun. It's really, really hard. There's a price that comes with it," Campbell said. "To do this job, you got to be willing to have a broken heart. You will be put to the test and will have to make a lot of choices."

While deaths are hard for anyone who deals with animals, it's even harder for Campbell who gets to know each bat personally.

Each bat Campbell keeps has a name, and she even has a roster for them.

The roster is small pieces of paper, each marked with a name, that are placed near each other, forming a square. Because male bats can be territorial, or less sociable than their female counterparts, Campbell is using the papers and her knowledge of her bats personalities and characteristics to help her decide how she will group the bats in the near future.

"When you have 98 bats, it's easier to remember them by name than a number," Campbell said.

The loss of bats can be detrimental to the ecosystem because of the insect control they provide.

"Without bats, these pests will be more populous," Campbell said. "Even if people think they are weird, they are one of the most helpful animals available."

To combat the disease, scientists are researching treatments involving vaccines, antifungal chemicals, and modifying hibernation habitats.

five-and-a-half hours of sleep recently, and often sleeps less when she is busy caring for very young bats. In addition, she said she had to give up having a social life to stay close to her home to care for her patients.

Besides giving a talk in Sayre, Pennsylvania, the farthest she has been recently was Richford, where she went for ice cream on her birthday. Her big outings tend to be grocery shopping at Wegmans.

"I feel like it's a sense of duty," Campbell said as to why she runs the sanctuary. "If I didn't do this, I might have more fun, but I would not be happy."

## Tracking white-nose syndrome

In New York state, there are nine species of bats, including big brown bats, little brown bats, Eastern small foot, little tricolor bats, little Eastern red bats and silver-haired bats.

Scientists believe the fungus that causes white-nose syndrome was brought to the United States from Europe. The fungus thrives in cold temperatures like in caves and uses bats as a substrate to grow over.

While it can grow on the bats' noses, the fungus also can grow on other parts of bats' skin, and more frequently appears on their wings than their noses.

The fungus bothers the bats by making them itch. This in turn causes them to scratch themselves, using up their energy while they are hibernating, which causes dehydration.

"We see in rehabilitation that sometimes their immune system makes it through the winter, but in the spring, it

goes into overdrive," Campbell said.

The mortality rate for bats with White-Nose Syndrome can often reach as high as 90 to 100 percent, according to the Cornell Wildlife Health Lab.

"We do not know of any other group of animals that have been affected by P. destructans," said Elizabeth Buckles, an associate clinical professor at Cornell University, about the fungus that causes White Nose Syndrome. "The combination of the bats being in hibernation and the biology of the fungus have thus far made this a unique host/pathogen relationship."

## 'I'm not finding any little brown bats'

Because of White Nose Syndrome, John Hermanson, an associate professor at Cornell University, has seen a drastic decrease in the population of little brown bats.

"If you go back 25 years, little brown bats were the most numerous in the area," Hermanson said.

Twenty-five years ago, he would visit several barns in the area and see 1,600 to 1,800 bats.

"Now, if I go to the same location where there was a maternity roost, I'm not finding any little brown bats," Hermanson said.

He said only eight or nine maternity roosts for little brown bats are left and that there has been a 98% decrease in female little brown bats at these maternity roosts.

"Whether or not the numbers will stabilize where they currently are is not known, so let's hope that either the re-