

Nature Conservancy protects Cave River Valley

Acquisition to be managed by Spring Mill State Park

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CAMPBELLSBURG — Several extensive caves in Washington County were permanently protected recently, which means the rare and endangered animals that call these caves home — particularly the Indiana bat — have also received protection. The Nature Conservancy, working with the Indiana Department of Natural Resources Divisions of State Parks and Reservoirs and Fish & Wildlife and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, purchased approximately 316 acres known as Cave River Valley from Cave River Valley, LLC.

One of the most noteworthy features of the property is its caves. Two scenic and significant caves accentuate the valley. The first, River Cave, has 3,900 feet of underground stream passages where a population of the state-endangered northern cavefish is found. The second, Endless Cave, is 6,900 feet in length harboring an important colony of hibernating Indiana bats.

“Cave River Valley presented a wonderful opportunity for The Nature Conservancy to preserve critical habitat for several cave species and the threatened Indiana bat,” said Mary McConnell, state director for the Conservancy’s Indiana chapter. “Areas that contain populations of both Indiana bats and northern cavefish are extremely rare and therefore the protection of these areas

present us with a nearly unparalleled opportunity for cave conservation in Indiana. Equally important is the additional recreation opportunities this land will provide to Hoosiers for generations to come.”

In recent years, Cave River Valley has become increasingly important for hibernating Indiana bats. Prior to 1990, few Indiana bats were known to hibernate here. But since that time the number has grown significantly. By 2007, almost 1,700 Indiana bats were found here along with an additional 1,500 little brown bats and 200 bats of other species. Endless Cave is the eighth most important Indiana bat hibernaculum in the state and the second largest little brown bat hibernaculum.

The Indiana bat has been a federally endangered species since 1967, one of the first species to be placed on the list. It is also on the Indiana Endangered Species list.

The Indiana bat received its name because the first one of this species was collected at the Wyandotte Cave in Southern Indiana. It hibernates in caves and mines within the state in the winter.

“These bats hibernate for approximately six months in the winter,” said Lori Pruitt, with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife. “They don’t eat for approximately six months and they need to be undisturbed for the hibernation period. The less they are disturbed the less fat they burn off during hibernation.”

“During the past few years,” she added, “there has been a lot of winter visitation to this cave. The site will now be closed during the winter hibernation period, allowing the bats an undisturbed hibernation.”

Pruitt said the Indiana bat isn’t the typical bat Hoosiers see fluttering around at night.

“The Indiana bat can migrate up to 300 miles from its hibernation area. It traditionally migrates to wooded areas, where the females form maternity colonies and bare their young under the bark of dead or dying trees. They can be common in some areas, especially near densely wooded areas.”

The Indiana bat is similar in size to the little brown bat. Typically they have a six-inch or smaller wing span and weigh six to seven grams.

“They are small fragile things,” said Pruitt.

The Division of State Parks and Reservoirs is applying for Indiana Heritage Trust funds that will allow the DNR to purchase the property from The Nature Conservancy in the coming months. Financial partners include The Nature Conservancy, the DNR’s Divisions of Nature Preserves and Fish and Wildlife, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The Nature Conservancy will transfer the property to the Division of State Parks and Reservoirs in the coming months.

Spring Mill State Park will be assuming temporary management during this process.

“The DNR understands the significance of this site, both from a natural heritage perspective and from a human perspective,” said Ginger Murphy from the Division of State Parks and Reservoirs. “We want to provide recreational access for the caving community, but we are also accepting responsibility for managing the unique and fragile natural communities at the site.” Caving will be allowed on the property, but the site will be temporarily closed, as all partners further assess the management needs and plan the work needed to reopen it next year.

“The Indiana Department of Natural Resources should assume ownership of the property sometime in the October to November time frame,” said Mark Young, property manager at Spring Mill State Park. “The Nature Conservancy is not really designed to manage the operation of properties. This will become a satellite property to Spring Mill and we will oversee its operation when it reopens to the public next year.”

Young said the property will offer some limited day use, such as picnic areas and hiking trails, and will also have small primitive campground. He said improvements to the property will be made, including improvements on the roads inside the property.

The property is currently closed to the public and will be closed from public use during the winter months, which is when the Indiana bat hibernates in the cave. Young said plans are to reopen the property to the public on or around March 22.

For more information on The Nature Conservancy and Cave River Valley, visit www.nature.org/indiana. To learn more about the Indiana DNR, Spring Mill State Park and the Indiana Heritage Trust program, visit www.dnr.IN.gov.