

Protecting the Creatures of the Night

STACY WOLBERT specializes in studying Pennsylvania's bats

By Michael M. Schofield



Credit: Calvin Butchkoski

Stacy Wolbert admires an Eastern screech owl (*Megascops asio*) that was accidentally caught in a trap meant for bats. Live traps are just one way that Wolbert and other biologists are monitoring bat populations in Pennsylvania.

Stacy Wolbert began her career in the dark. She spent her nights alone in forests, surrounded by strange sounds and shining animal eyes. Armed with a radio and headlamp, Wolbert studied bats. “We put little transmitters on the bats and released them and then we followed them all night long,” she says. Tracking the bats helped gather information on their habitat, feeding behavior, and home range.

But this was not how Wolbert anticipated starting her career. “I actually never dreamt I would ever work with bats,” Wolbert says. In fact, she was originally hoping to work with bears when she began her Associates Degree in Wildlife Technology at Penn State-DuBois. Wolbert was therefore hesitant when a professor told her about the open summer position tracking bats with the Pennsylvania Game Commission.

The job was located on the other side of the state, involved long night shifts, and bats didn't interest Wolbert. However, the summer position meant a paycheck and first-hand field experience.

Wolbert took the job in 2000, and it changed her career trajectory. It was here that Wolbert met her

mentor, Calvin Butchkoski, a wildlife biologist for the Game Commission. His guidance helped her cultivate an appreciation for the flying mammals and their ability to control insect populations. “I fell in love with bats and never once thought about working with bears again,” she says. “[Bats] are such beneficial creatures that are so underestimated by our society.”

In addition to using radio transmitters to understand bat habitat and feeding behavior, Wolbert helped her mentor gather rough counts of bats by watching them emerge from their roosts at dusk. She also used ultra thin nets to capture and understand bats in different areas. Monitoring bat populations like this is increasingly important due to habitat destruction and white nose syndrome—a poorly understood disease threatening the state's bats.

Wolbert worked summers with the Game Commission while she completed a B.Sc. in Wildlife and Fisheries Science at Pennsylvania State University-University Park. Each summer, Wolbert had to readjust to working long nights in the woods. For the first few days, she jumped at every sound. But by the end of her first week, she would be back in her element.

After graduation, Wolbert worked part time with the Game Commission for three years before completing a M.S. in Biology from Pennsylvania's East Stroudsburg University. Her [recently published thesis](#) examined changes in bat activity and insect abundance along an elevational gradient.

Carving Her Own Path

Wolbert has since held several full-time positions for the Game Commission. Although none of these involved working for Butchkoski, bats have remained her specialty. As she's established herself in the field, Butchkoski has continued to serve as a mentor and valuable informational resource on bats.

Wolbert began working for the Game Commission as a wildlife habitat biologist for the [Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program](#) that helps farms establish conservation practices in exchange for annual compensation. Five months later, the Commission

launched a cooperative wind energy program to address the state's increase in commercial wind activity. Wolbert became a wildlife biologist for the program and helped monitor the potential impact of commercial wind energy on birds and bats.

Wolbert switched positions again when a job opened up near her hometown in Clarion county. She is currently Northwest Regional Wildlife Diversity Biologist and enjoys the position as it allows her to focus on nongame species of greatest conservation concern. She currently helps develop comprehensive management plans for state game lands.

The position also enables Wolbert to continue studying bats. The state has nine bat species, including the federally endangered Indiana bat (*Myotis sodalis*) and the proposed endangered northern long-eared

bat (*Myotis septentrionalis*). Wolbert is helping initiate a survey that will allow biologists to monitor these and other bat species from moving vehicles. Already used in neighboring states, these surveys record ultrasonic "echolocation" bat calls from cars. Biologists use these recordings to determine what bat species are in an area. The surveys will allow Wolbert and biologists to understand bat populations in larger regions and monitor response to disease and habitat threats.

The only drawback of Wolbert's current work is that it means fewer nights in the forests. She sometimes finds herself missing the early days of her career. "I try to go out [to do night work] every chance I get," she says. Those initial long nights in the woods fostered her desire to help bats and helped shape her into the wildlife professional she is today. ■

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MENTOR CALVIN BUTCHKOSKI

Retired Wildlife Biologist
Pennsylvania Game Commission

He may be retired, but Calvin Butchkoski will always be known as "the bat and rat guy." The wildlife biologist dedicated his career to studying Pennsylvania's bats and Allegheny woodrats. However, the unusual nickname doesn't bother him a bit—especially if it helps bring public awareness to these misunderstood animals. "I've been called worse," he laughs.

Butchkoski's road to this unusual nickname began on a farm in Pennsylvania. His experience working with animals and his love of hunting made it natural for him to pursue an Associates Degree in Wildlife Technology from Penn State-DuBois. He went on to spend three years in the United States Marine Corps. After being honorably discharged, Butchkoski knew he wanted to continue working with wildlife. One of his college professors contacted him while he was working for the Boy Scouts of America and told him about a job opening for a wildlife technician. Butchkoski applied and began working for the Pennsylvania Game Commission in 1982.

As Butchkoski moved his way up through the Game Commission's ranks, he began working with nongame species. He was shocked at how little was known about bats and woodrats in particular and began specializing in these animals. He spent over 30 years working with the Game Commission and made significant strides to help these species and increase public awareness about their management.

Butchkoski helped develop artificial roosts for bats along with a bat condo design that has since been used internationally. The bat condo imitates the inside of a church steeple and is capable of housing up to 6,000 female bats and their young. These artificial homes provide a safe shelter for bats and help the state's battle against white nose



Credit: Cynthia Hauser

An inquisitive Allegheny woodrat (*Neotoma magister*) explores Calvin Butchkoski's jacket.

syndrome—a disease that has wiped out about 95 percent of Pennsylvania's bat population. "I'm proud of the fact that there are survivors of white nose [syndrome] and the federally endangered Indiana bat using artificial structures," he says.

He also feels that his career helped foster a greater awareness of Allegheny woodrats in the state. Forest fragmentation threatens woodrat habitats, and many of the trees the animals depend on for food are being wiped out by disease and insect infestations. Butchkoski helped develop an extensive management plan for woodrats during his time with the Game Commission.

The plan provided a model for understanding the health of the state's woodrat population and habitat. It also provided woodrat management workshops and helped initiate a captive breeding program in conjunction with Purdue University. The program was recently brought to Delaware Valley College in eastern Pennsylvania.

Butchkoski spent many long nights studying these nocturnal animals. "Night work gets to you after a while, especially the older you get," he says. When he needed an extra pair of ears to help track bats through Pennsylvania's woods, he went to his alma mater. This is how he began mentoring Stacy Wolbert. "Having people like Stacy with young ears is a huge help," he says. Wolbert's positive attitude and perseverance despite the difficulty of long night shifts made her stand out in the field.

Butchkoski retired from the Game Commission this past April, but that doesn't stop him from keeping up with wildlife work. "I'm still keeping tabs on things and just helping people when they need it," he says.

Butchkoski earned his unique nickname from a long career of significant contributions to the conservation of two unique animals, and his legacy as Pennsylvania's "bat and rat guy" lives on. "These animals are some of the nuts and bolts of good old Mother Earth that we need to keep an eye on," he says.