

Sabula Railroad Tunnel Bat Project

By Jared Shippey

Deep in the woods of Sabula, Pennsylvania lies an old, abandoned railroad tunnel. After years of dormancy, many species of bats have taken refuge here. Through the years, the tunnel had been used by other partners such as the PA Game Commission, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and universities to conduct research on bat populations and diseases. However, because of the tunnel's remote location,

it has become a popular site for locals and others in search of a secluded place to hang out or ghost hunt. These visitors are detrimental to the ongoing research and the bat populations within the tunnel.

The USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) Dubois Field Office became involved during the summer of 2017 to help restore the site to protect the bats. When field office staff first visited the site, there proved



Tunnel entrance prior to gate construction project.

to be some challenges associated with the restoration plan. It was not evident who the land belonged to, so State Conservationist, Denise Coleman assisted the field office in determining that the tunnel entrances were split between two separate landowners.

To protect the bat habitat and keep intruders out, the PA Game Commission installed gates. Greg Turner, from the PA Game Commission, provided the Dubois Field Office and the Clarion Technical Office with standard drawings for the gates.

The next challenge proved to be the physical location of the tunnel. The wet summer and limited access made it difficult for the contractor to move equipment to the site. Since the bats typically start occupying the tunnel

in mid-October, the completion date was set for October 1st.

According to Greg Turner, the tunnel only housed big brown bats when they first began conducting research years ago. The population varied depending on how cold the winter was since colder winters drive more big browns from homes in barns to underground sites, like the tunnel. Turner estimated a total of 100-350 bats depending on the year. They have now confirmed a few tri-colored bats, federally threatened long-eared bats, and up to 66 little brown bats. According to Turner, the number of little browns had increased annually despite the disturbance at the tunnel. He anticipates bat populations to continue to increase now since NRCS installed the gates to protect them.



Completed gate to protect tunnel entrance.