

?Nature Conservancy protects Cave River Valley

Written by Administrator

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?? Southern Indiana is famed for its rolling hills and vast caves. Several extensive caves in Washington County recently were permanently protected, which means that the rare and endangered animals—particularly the Indiana bat—that call these caves home 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 CaveRiverValley from Cave River Valley LLC. Without a doubt the most noteworthy feature of the property is its caves. Two scenic and significant caves accentuate the valley. The first, RiverCave, has 3,900 feet of underground stream passages where a population of the state-endangered northern cavefish is found. The second, EndlessCave, is 6,900 feet in length harboring an important colony of hibernating Indiana bats.

“CaveRiverValley 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 CaveRiverValley 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. EndlessCave is the eighth most important Indiana bat hibernaculum in the state and the second largest little brown bat hibernaculum.

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.

For more information on The Nature Conservancy and CaveRiverValley, 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.