Title: Recovery of Myotis in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula

# **Introduction:**

Understanding the environmental conditions and suitable habitats that support wildlife is crucial for effective management, particularly for species like bats that are facing significant population declines in North America. Bats in the northeastern United States are limited by a scarcity of hibernacula, leading to congregations in locations that provide optimal conditions for hibernation, typically lasting approximately six months (Davis & Hitchcock 1965). These hibernacula are often underground sites such as caves and mines, characterized by high humidity and temperatures ranging between 0-10C (Heldmaier et al. 2004).

The emergence of *Pseudogymnoascus destructans* (Pd), the pathogen responsible for White-nose Syndrome (WNS), has further complicated habitat assessments and bat populations dynamics (Lorch et al., 2011; Warnecke et al. 2012). First identified in New York during the winter of 2006-2007, WNS has since spread across North America, leading to the death of up to 90% of hibernating bat populations in eastern United States (Meteyer et al., 2009; Hout et al., 2021). This disease has had devasting effects on several bat species, leading to several being listed or under review of being listed as endangered or threatened (Turner et al., 2011; Frick et al., 2015; Hoyt et al., 2021).

Research has shown that Pd thrives in cold temperatures, with active growing beginning at 3 ℃ and optimal growth occurring between 12.5-15.8 ℃ in laboratory settings (Verant et al., 2012). The fungus invades the skin of bats during hibernation, causing erosions and frequent arousals that deplete fat reserves and often lead to mortality (Frick et al., 2016). Notably, higher fungal loads correlate with increased mortality rates, particularly in bats hibernating closer to the fungus’s optimal growth range (Langwig et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 2014, 2016; Hayman et al., 2016).

However, recent studies have identified remnant populations of bats in colder hibernacula, suggesting that microclimate selection may play a crucial role in bat survival post-WNS (Johnson et al., 2016; Loeb & Winters, 2022). For example, *Myotis lucifugus* hibernated at an average temperature of 2 ℃ in New York, surviving despite being Pd-positive (Lilley et al., 2016). This finding indicates that wildlife management strategies focused on promoting cooler hibernacula could help mitigate the impacts of Pd and reduce mortality rates.

In the Upper Great Lakes region, suitable hibernacula are scarce. However, the western Upper Peninsula of Michigan is notable for its hundreds of mines excavated since the 1840s (Kurta & Smith 2014). Before WNS arrived, Kurta and Smith (2014) surveyed 119 subterranean sites, finding that Myotis species – predominantly Little Brown Bats (*Myotis lucifugus*) and Northern Long-Eared Bats (*Myotis septentrionalis*) – comprised over 99% of the bat population. These bats were concentrated in a few, large, complex mines, with temperature and the presence of warm air traps identified as key factors in sites selection.

White-nose syndrome reached Michigan’s Upper Peninsula in the winter of 2013-2014, resulting in a 90% decline in bat populations by 2020, from 138,068 to 13,988 (Kurta & Smith 2020).

This study investigates three hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1). Population decline (crash rate) caused by WNS will be correlated with Myotis population recovery rates at each site, so the sites with higher population declines will have slower population growth and vice versa.

Hypothesis 2). Cooler microclimates within hibernacula will exhibit slower crash rates and faster recovery.

Hypothesis 3). Myotis populations pre-WNS surveys will show a preference for relatively warmer hibernacula, while post-WNS surveys will indicate a shift toward cooler sites in response to the disease.

## **Methods:**

## **Study area:**

Most hibernacula sites in Michigan are in the western third of the Upper Peninsula (UP) (46.79-47.43 N, 87.59-90.14 W). This region is sparsely populated by humans (US Census Bureau 2020) and is mostly covered by conifers and northern hardwoods. Elevation varies from 184 to 604 meters above sea level. The western UP has Lake Superior to the north and Wisconsin to the south and west.

Winters are snowy, long, and cold with the first minimum temperature of 0 ℃ occurring in early November and the last such temperature of the winter occurring in April (NOAA; Supplemental File). The cold climate results in overwintering populations of bats peaking by late October, and most individuals remain underground until late April (Kurta et al. 1997; Meyer et al. 2016; Stones & Fritz 1969; Wheeler 1982).

## **Data collection**

This study utilized 598 surveys of 205 hibernacula across Michigan, the majority in the western Upper Peninsula (Kurta & Smith 2014). Mine characteristics, environmental conditions, and biological data were recorded at each site.

Mine Characteristics:

Data included the geological composition (ore type), the length of the main passage (passage length), and the number of levels and shafts accessible to humans.

Environmental Conditions:

Environmental conditions were recorded intermittently, depending on the equipment available at the time of the survey. The measurements recorded included whether the site had any standing water at the entrance or bottom of the shaft, external temperature, internal temperature, and relative humidity. Between 1980 and 2013, internal temperatures were recorded using mercury thermometers to measure air temperature. In 2014, laser infrared thermometers were introduced, measuring surface rock temperatures. Due to inconsistencies in temperature measurement methods and equipment, a mean temperature was calculated for each site and used as the primary temperature variable. Internal relative humidity was inconsistently recorded and therefore excluded from the analysis.

Biological Data:

During each survey, the total number of bats were recorded and identified to species or genus. The focus was on Myotis species, which included Little Brown Bats and Northern Long-Eared Bats. *Eptesicus fuscus* (Big Brown Bats) and *Perimyotis subflavus* (Tri-colored Bats) were also noted but removed from the analysis because *Eptesicus fuscus* does not experience high mortality from WNS (CITE) and *Perimyotis subflavus* is historically rare in our study area. Due to the lack of differentiation between Myotis species in some surveys, total Myotis counts were used as the response variable.

The first survey was conducted in 1980, but regular and consistent surveys began in 1996. To ensure that data reflected significant hibernacula, we excluded sites that were surveyed only once or had fewer than five bats recorded. This filtering resulted in 308 surveys across 42 sites, which were included in some analyses.

All surveys were conducted under approved wildlife protection regulations, and the protocol was designed to minimize any disturbance to the hibernating bats by limiting time spent within the mines.

## Data analysis

### Hypothesis 1:

To investigate our first hypothesis, we used data from 33 hibernacula sites that have adequate survey data pre- and post-WNS of which 23 of those sites have recovering populations of Myotis.

We calculated the population crash rate using the formula:

Population Crash Rate = 1 – (Minimum Survey Count / Mean Survey Count Before WNS).

This captures the overall population decline from a “steady state” before WNS to the minimum number of bats surveyed after the introduction of Pd.

We calculated the slope of recovery by first normalizing bat counts at each site to a range of [0, 1] using the formula:

Normalized Count = (count – minimum count) / (mean count before WNS / minimum count).

This ensures that the mean count before WNS “steady state” at each site is standardized to 1 and the minimum count to 0. We then fit a linear regression of normalized count against relative year (where year 0 is the year after WNS affected population crashes) to derive the slope of recovery for each site (either positive or negative).

**LM:** normalized count ~ relative year.

To investigate our first prediction that population crash rates caused by WNS are correlated with Myotis population recovery rates (N=33), we fit the following model:

**LM:** slope of recovery ~ population crash.

### Hypothesis 2:

After processing the data, we constructed two separate sets of models. One we used a Bayesian hierarchical regression model with a Beta family distribution for the likelihood to model crash rate as a function of mean temperature and log transformed passage length.

The second, we used the Student T-distribution for the likelihood to model the recovery rate as a function of mean temperature, the log transformed passage length, and an offset variable for the number of years of recovery to account for the difference in the duration of recovery between the sites.

We fit models using the `brm` function in R package (brms) (Bürkner 2017). We assumed weakly informative priors (Normal (0,1)) for the intercept and slope. We ran 4000 iterations each with 1000 warmup iterations and an adapt\_delta of 0.99. All models showed convergence with R-hat values close to 1.

We used leave-one-out cross-validation (LOO-CV) to compare model performance. Leave-one-out cross-validation provides a more robust estimate of predictive accuracy in Bayesian models. It is especially useful when handling small sample sizes or influential observations, as it avoids the biases inherent in other criteria such as AIC or WAIC.

### Hypothesis 3:

To investigate our third hypothesis that Myotis species selected different habitat post-WNS infection we used 3708 surveys from 42 sites, 168 surveys were conducted before WNS caused mortalities and 125 surveys were conducted after WNS caused mortalities.

We calculated the proportions of bats in each mine to the totals in each period (before and after). We then subtracted the proportions (period after – period before), therefore a positive number indicated that site held a higher relative proportion of bats post-WNS and a negative number indicated that site held a lower relative proportion of bats pre-WNS. We then fit the models:

**LM1:** proportions ~ mean\_temp

**LM2:** proportions ~ mean\_temp + mean\_temp2

These results indicated habitat selection compared to habitat availability. We removed unimportant sites (sites <100 bats) from our final analysis. The sites that were unimportant before WNS were still unimportant after WNS because of other habitat or microclimate conditions that the larger population of Myotis were not selecting.

## RESULTS:

### Hypothesis 1

Our results support our hypothesis that sites with environmental conditions conducive to Pd growth will exhibit a correlation between the rates of population decline and subsequent recovery. The sites with higher population declines had slower recovery rates of species because they are persistently dealing with Pd (adjusted R2 = 0.3667, p-value 0.0001436).

A graph of a recovery rate and the population crash

Description automatically generated

Figure . Population crash rates (1 - (minimum count after WNS/mean pop count before WNS) compared to recovery rates of myotis bats in mines in Michigan’s upper peninsula.

Hypothesis 2

Model: (crash ~ mean temperature) was selected as the final model due to its higher predictive accuracy (as shown by LOO-CV) and simpler structure compared to model 2 and model 3, which included additional covariates without improving predictive performance.

This model included mean temperature as the sole predictor. The inclusion of extra covariates did not significantly improve predictive performance, as indicated by the small ELPD differences between the models and their standard errors. This suggests that mean temperature alone is a sufficient predictor of population crash rate for these sites.

The posterior mean estimate for the effect of mean temperature on crash rate was -0.23 (95% credible interval: 0, 45) suggesting that higher mean temperatures are associated with an increase in crash rate (Table 2). Each additional degree of temperature is expected to increase the crash rate by 23% (0, 45%).

A graph of a graph showing the temperature of a car

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

Figure . The relationship between population crash rates (1 - (Minimum count / Maximum count)) and mean temperature. Colder sites had significantly smaller population crashes compared to warmer sites. The green line represents the posterior mean estimate from the final Bayesian model (Crash rate ~ Mean Temperature). The size of the points represent the mean population size for each site before WNS.

Model (slope ~ mean temperature) was selected as the final model due to its higher predictive accuracy (as shown by LOO-CV).

The posterior mean estimate for the effect of mean temperature on recovery rate was -0.25 (95% credible interval: -0.53 to 0.01), suggesting that higher mean temperatures are associated with a decrease in recovery rate, however, not statistically significant (credible interval overlaps with 0).

A graph of a curve

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Figure . The relationship between population recovery rates and mean temperature. Colder sites have faster recovery rates compared to warmer sites, however, not statistically significant. The blue line represents the posterior mean estiamte from the final bayesian model (Slope ~ Mean Temperature).

### Hypothesis 3.

The best model was (proportion of bats ~ mean temperature + mean temperature2). We found that on average sites that had colder mean temperatures held a higher proportion of LBB after the introduction of WNS (adjusted R2 = 0.3171, p-value = 0.00106). Because of their low reproductive rate of LBB this must be due to some migration to cooler sites rather than purely reproduction.

A graph of a graph showing the temperature of a bat

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

Figure . The figure represents the proportion of bats for each site from two periods (After WNS proportions – Before WNS proportions). Blue dots indicate sites where the proportion of bats increased post-WNS, while red dots represent sites with a decreased proportion of bats post-WNS. The x-axis represents the mean temperature of each site, the black line is the best-fit quadratic regression model (proportion of bats ~ mean temperature + mean temperature2), with the shaded region showing the 95% confidence interval. Adjusted r2 = 0.3171, p-value = 0.00106.

Discussion

Since the emergence of Pd, cave-dwelling bat populations have declined by as much as 90% (Kurta and Smith 2020). This devastating impact has prompted scientists and wildlife managers to develop strategies aimed at mitigating the disease’s effects and promoting the recovery of affected populations.

Various techniques have been explored, including fumigation, inoculation, vaccination, and UV treatment, each showing various degrees of success (Gabriel et al. 2018; Padhi et al 2018; Micalizzi & Smith 2020; Rusman et al. 2020; Hoyt et al. 2017, 2019; Palmer et al. 2018; Hartman et al. 2020; Kwait et al. 2022; Rocke et al. 2019; McGuire et al. 2019).

Our findings show that bats in cooler hibernacula tend to be more resilient to Pd infection. This is likely due to the temperature-dependent growth rate of the fungus, as temperatures around 4 ℃ inhibit its growth while still supporting bat hibernation. The relationship between cooler microclimate selection and increased survival has likely exerted strong evolutionary pressures, driving bats to hibernate in cooler conditions. Understanding these adaptive responses, while simultaneously developing methods to manipulate hibernacula temperatures to enhance overwintering survival, representing a pressing line of inquiry.

Our first hypothesis explored the relationship between the slope of recovery rate for each hibernacula site and the population crash rate. The results indicate that sites with a lower population crash rate also exhibited higher recovery rates. This recovery could partly be attributed to the presence of more bats in the sites following the crash. However, this does not fully explain why these sites had a less severe crash initially and then demonstrated a faster recovery. To address this, we used our second hypothesis to examine the microclimate conditions within these hibernacula that contributed to a less severe population crash. Our first hypothesis suggests that the same microclimate conditions that helped reduce the severity of the population crash after the introduction *Pseudogymnoascus destructans* (Pd) are also the factors that enable bats to recover. This finding becomes even more clear when we only include hibernacula that are recovering by removing those sites that have not recovered from their initial population crash. These findings are promising, as they suggest that certain hibernacula in Michigan provide the right microclimates that allow *Myotis lucifugus* to tolerate WNS, survive, and reproduce.

Our second hypothesis aimed to identify the microclimate conditions responsible for population crashes and subsequent recovery. We considered mean temperature and passage length (a proxy for site size) as key variables. It became clear that passage length was not an important variable for these response variables at this time, so we removed it from our model. The population crash rate model revealed considerable variation, as indicated by the loose fit of the regression line. This variability is likely due to the fact that many bats were susceptible to Pd when it was first introduced, and regardless of the microclimate conditions at many of these sites, those susceptible to the disease succumbed to it. We used mean temperature instead of other temperature variables because temperature measurements were taken during surveys, providing a snapshot of the site temperature at the time of each survey. By compiling the temperature measurements from all surveys and calculating a mean temperature for each site, we reduced the year-to-year variability that external temperature fluctuations might introduce.

Alternatively, if we had used minimum and maximum temperature, we would only have captured the extreme temperature at a single point within the site. We know the temperature can vary across a site, and not all measurements reflect the areas where the bats hibernate within a site. To minimize this variability and the potential for inaccuracies we used a mean temperature. However, the absence of consistent, accurate internal temperature measurements increased the variability in our models, which in turn reduced their fit. The variation in temperature that a hibernacula experiences throughout the year is likely important for fungal growth and bat recovery. Unfortunately, due to the lack of accurate year-round temperature data at each site, we could not incorporate this variation into our analysis.

Future steps will involve quantifying the seasonal temperature variation at each site and within each site used in our analysis and updating the model accordingly. The outliers and the strength of the models likely reflect some of the limitations of the current survey data. Nevertheless, the general trend is clear: sites that tend to be cooler, as indicated by the mean temperatures from the surveys, appear to be more beneficial for *Myotis lucifugus* in the presence of Pd. This is likely due to the temperature-dependent growth rate of Pd.

Our third hypothesis shows the limitations of our survey data but also indicates clues for management. Most sites did not gain or lose the proportion of bats that use those sites for hibernation, with some noticeable exceptions. Four hibernacula had a 10% decrease in the proportion of bats that use those sites after after WNS population crashes. From a management perspective this likely indicates sites with poor quality habitat that are being selected against in the presence of Pd. Three of these sites have high mean temperatures above 7 ℃, while one site has a cooler mean temperature just above 4 ℃. This outlier should be investigated further. Two hibernacula sites gained almost 10% proportionally more bats and one site gained more than 25% proportionally more bats post-WNS. These sites potentially indicate good quality habitat in the presence of Pd, and their microclimate conditions should be investigated further. Either their conditions are non-conducive to Pd growth or there are some other microbial conditions reducing Pd growth within the sites.

One important factor influencing Pd growth that we did not incorporate into our models is humidity. We excluded humidity measurements due to the lack of data at most sites. However, literature indicates that the most severely affected species (*M. lucifugus*, *Myotis septentrionalis*, and *Perimyotis subflavus*) tend to roost in the most humid locations within hibernacula (Cryan et al. 2010; Langwig et al. 2012; Hayman et al. 2016), often maintaining relative humidity levels around 90 to 100% (Thomas and Cloutier 1992).

Research shows that increasing humidity in the presence of Pd generally correlates with decreased bat survival (Langwig et al. 2012), as Pd growth is positively associated with humidity (Hayman et al. 2016) and influences bat arousal patterns (Warnecke et al. 2012; Reeder et al. 2012; Nem-Hamo 2013). Notably, a single arousal bout of Myotis lucifugus hibernating at 5 ℃ consumes the equivalent fat energy of 67 days spent in torpor (Thomas et al. 1990).

Given this knowledge, it is reasonable to assume that the bats in these sites are experiencing high relative humidity levels. In many cases, relative humidity far from the entrance of a cave approaches 100% (Wigley 1969; Cigna, 2004). However, relative humidity, defined as the amount of water vapor present in the air relative to the maximum amount of water vapor the air can hold at saturation, is influenced by temperature. Warmer air can hold more water than colder air, meaning that the amount of water vapor in the air depends on the site temperature. Even though we did not directly account for relative humidity in our models, we understand that warmer sites will retain more moisture in the air at equivalent relative humidity levels, potentially promoting increased growth rates of Pd.

# APPENDIX

