



# Welcome to the Nursery



Sauta Cave National Wildlife Refuge was established to preserve one of the greatest wildlife spectacles in eastern North America. Each summer the cave is home to hundreds of thousands of endangered Gray Bats. Although a few bats use the cave throughout the year, it is during the summer months when numbers hit their peak.

Deep within this cave, thousands of these mammals sleep soundly during the day. If you were allowed to enter, you would be greeted by an amazing sight as thousands of tiny bats hang from the ceiling waiting for nightfall.

Each evening during the summer, the bats leave the cave to forage along the Tennessee River. By standing just to the side of the cave mouth, visitors will see thousands of bats streaming past just before dark. Numbers will peak in early summer when the year's young are ready to fly.

## Do Not Disturb

The Gray Bat was federally listed as an endangered species in 1976 after studies showed that their population had declined by over 50 percent. The reasons for their decline are due to heavy human disturbance of the caves they inhabit. Disturbing a maternity cave in early summer could result in thousands of baby bats falling to the floor and perishing. Fortunately the decline of Gray Bats

has reversed as more of the caves needed to roost and breed are being protected. Also found in Sauta Cave during the winter is the Indiana Bat, another endangered species. Unlike Gray Bats, Indiana Bats are not fairing well. Though only a few hundred Indiana bats can be found in Sauta during the winter, this is still the largest colony of these incredibly rare mammals in Alabama.



Hibernating Indiana Bats/ADCNR, Keith Hudson



Young Flightless Gray Bats/Keith Hudson

## The Maternity Chamber

Gray bats are born without much hair and cannot fly until they are about three weeks old. During this time they hang from the cave ceiling in dense clusters of up to 180 bats per square foot. Some clusters number in the thousands. In this writhing confusion of hungry pink youngsters, the female gray bat will find and nurse her offspring.



Downy Woodpecker/Terry Hartley

## More than Just the Cave

With over 260 acres to explore, Sauta Cave NWR offers access to a freshwater marsh and adjacent hardwood forest. Check the dead tree limbs in the marsh for woodpeckers and listen for the song of the spectacular Prothonotary Warbler. During spring, the woods are alive with a variety of woodland birds.