

## GOING BATS IN THE ORTIZ!

Bill Baxter

The Ortiz Mountains Educational Preserve is home to an important piece of New Mexican history, the Santo Niño mine shaft, the oldest (1830 or earlier) lode gold mine in the American West. In 2002, the State of New Mexico sealed most of the hazardous mines in the Preserve, but not the Santo Niño because somebody was living there: Townsend's Big-eared bats. *Plecotus townsendii pallescens*, formerly *Corynorhinus townsendii*.

Townsend's big-eared bats are found from Canada to Mexico, but their numbers are not great and are declining. In New Mexico they are being monitored as a possible endangered species. Relatively sedentary, the Townsend's do not move long distances from hibernacula (permanent habitations) to summer roosts nor do they fly or forage far from their day roosts. They are Lepidopteran specialists with a diet consisting primarily of moths. They like to live in forested habitat and along vegetated stream corridors, avoiding open grasslands and don't tolerate human disturbance well. They depend strongly on the availability of caves or cave-like roosting habitat (old mines), and about 40% of the larger abandoned mines in New Mexico, like the Santo Niño, show evidence of use by this species.

During hibernation if the temperature drops below freezing the bats will move deeper into a tunnel, but if aroused from winter hibernation, they can use up 10 to 30 days' supply of fat reserves and that can lead to starvation. So, our bats actually benefit from the fact that December through March the OMEP has no visitors.



This year, the SFBG conducted three evening bat counts at the Santo Niño. Enumerators usually sit quietly (or not so quietly) around the cupola on the Santo Niño and try to count bats as they spiral up the shaft one or two at a time and circle inside the cupola before exiting through the slats to feed for the night. For some reason our tiny fliers seem to like people. Once outside, they swoop noiselessly around just inches from our faces.

During the May-June birthing season we toted up thirty to sixty individuals in each census, so we guess the Santo Niño summertime colony has 75-100 individuals, about double the estimate made by the NM Abandoned Mine Land Bureau in 2002. But the late summer census only showed about a fifth that number. We don't know why. Summertime colony size may be 10 to 100 individuals or more. Hibernating winter colonies may be 1,000 or larger.

If you don't mind things that go squeak in the night and want to know more about what happens after the sun goes down in natural New Mexico help us with the 2005 OMEP Bat Census.