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Lawsuit Aims to Protect Critical Habitat for Endangered Florida Bonneted Bats

Bat Extremely Vulnerable to Habitat Destruction, Sea-Level Rise

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla.— Conservation groups [sued](#) the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today to push the agency to protect endangered Florida bonneted bats by designating lifesaving critical habitat. The bats face devastating habitat loss from sea-level rise and urban sprawl.

“The Service needs to protect the bats’ remaining habitat immediately for them to have any chance at survival,” said Ragan Whitlock, a Florida-based attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity. “To save endangered species, we have to protect the places where they live and forage. Protecting these bats’ home is long overdue.”

Development and pesticide use nearly drove [Florida bonneted bats](#) to extinction before [litigation](#) filed by the Center compelled the Service to protect the bat under the Endangered Species Act in 2013. Conservation groups again [sued](#) in 2018, pushing the Service to propose 1.5 million acres of critical habitat for the bats in 2020. But the Service has still not published a final critical habitat determination.

Today’s lawsuit was filed by the Center, the Miami Blue Chapter of the North American Butterfly Association, and Tropical Audubon Society. It was filed in U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Florida.

“It’s time for the Service to do its job,” said Dennis Olle, president of the Miami Blue Chapter of the North American Butterfly Association. “It is unfortunate that we have to resort to litigation to force the Service to do its statutory duty to protect this exceedingly rare species.”

“The Florida bonneted bat is one of the most critically endangered mammal species in North America,” notes Lauren Jonaitis, Tropical Audubon Society senior conservation director. “The most effective way to protect this unique South Florida species is to designate critical habitat, which is long overdue. Filing this lawsuit honors our organization’s legacy as ‘South Florida’s Voice of Conservation.’ Protecting habitat for the Florida bonneted bat will support the conservation movements of important bird species and other imperiled wildlife.”

Animals with federally protected critical habitat are more than [twice as likely](#) to be moving toward recovery than species without it. Federal agencies that fund or permit projects in critical habitat are required to consult with the Service to ensure this habitat is not harmed or destroyed by their actions.

Florida bonneted bats have one of the smallest ranges of any bat species, living only in South Florida — an area that’s highly susceptible to rising sea levels and development. Projections indicate that sea level will rise between 3 and 6 feet within much of the bats’ habitat over the course of this century. The bats are the largest found in the state and get their common name from the broad ears that extend over their foreheads like bonnets.



Florida bonneted bat. Credit: Kathleen Smith / Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. [Image is available for media use.](#)

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 1.7 million members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.

The Miami Blue Chapter serves southeastern Florida, specifically Miami-Dade and Monroe Counties. We are a membership based, not-for-profit organization working to increase the public enjoyment and conservation of butterflies. The Chapter is named after one of the rarest butterflies in North America, which used to (and one day will again) call Miami home.

Tropical Audubon Society is a science- and solutions-based nonprofit conservation organization driven by its grassroots community and principles of equity, diversity and inclusion. Tropical Audubon's Legacy is to protect, conserve and restore South Florida ecosystems by working closely with local governments and other stakeholders, and by fostering wise stewardship of native habitats, birds and other indigenous wildlife.

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