

Brand new and endangered species could change Indiana forest policies

By **Sophie Harris** | swharris@reporter-times.com | Updated Jul 2, 2016

If thousands of unknown and endangered species were living undiscovered in local forests, big changes could be on the horizon. And according to Executive Director of the Indiana Forest Alliance Jeff Stant, that's exactly what's happening in the Morgan-Monroe State Forest and Yellowwood State Forest.

The Indiana Forest Alliance has been conducting the Ecoblitz, an ongoing inventory of plants and animals in the Morgan-Monroe State Forest for the past three years. During this time, they've discovered a wide range of endangered and brand new species. According to a recent press release from the Forest Alliance, scientists have identified very rare bats, and three types of spiders were found in the state of Indiana for the first time. An entirely new species of spider was discovered, too, and they are now working with taxonomists to describe, name and publish information about their discovery.

"We've been having quite a year with it," Stant said.

Although he is unable to go into specifics until the DNR is aware of all the findings made by the Ecoblitz, Stant said he is able to speak generally about the nature of the findings. The inventory is made possible with support from the Nina Mason Pulliam Charitable Trust.

To conduct the study, the Indiana Forest Alliance has recruited nine different teams of scientists from 11 Indiana colleges and universities.

"For the past two weeks, we've been surveying for bats, reptiles, and amphibians," Stant said. "We're finding all kinds of new species and nationally endangered species of bats. We've found four new species of male salamanders."

The group discovered a male spider entirely new to science, from the family Linyphiidae, and Genus Agyneta. They also discovered a whitebanded fishing spider for the first time ever in Indiana.

Stant said the 900-acre area of the Morgan-Monroe State Forest and Yellowwood State Forest's back-country area, near Martinsville, are some of Indiana's oldest and most undisturbed forests.

According to the press release, results from this inventory are illustrating that an extremely biodiverse area: plants, fungi, birds, amphibians, reptiles, mammals, fish, insects, spiders, and other invertebrates exist in these forests. 1,254 species were identified in the first two years and hundreds more are being identified this year.

“Eighteen species of mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians on the federal or state lists of endangered species and species of special concern have been found in this forest,” said the release.

Stant said the diversity they’re discovering is astounding.

“The forest is very old and unmanaged,” Stant said. “We need to find out what’s in these older forests. It’s an important issue because there’s never been a survey done like this in these state and national forests. We need to know what’s in them before they’re logged.” Stant said it’s imperative that the lands are checked thoroughly and that there’s an accurate database.

“The state of Indiana has never checked them. They don’t know what’s in here,” Stant said. “This is the third year, and I thought we would wrap up this year, but we found so much new life that we’re going to have to continue and dig in more.”

Stant said the state has no immediate plans to log in the area, but the strategic plan has the Morgan-Monroe and Yellowwood areas in an “active timber base,” which means they could choose to do so at any time.

“It’s possible in the next few years,” Stant said. “The current plan would have them logging in the next decade, at least. So we are really under the gun to get this inventory done.”

Stant said he hopes findings from the inventory would halt the logging process or at least cause state officials to go take a closer look at the creatures in the forest, particularly if they’re endangered.

“They need to go in and look before they log,” Stant said. “Maybe they just shouldn’t log.” He added that the data should have a bearing on decisions about logging in our state forests.

“The current state administration has approved a policy to log through 95 percent of our taxpayer-owned state forests within the next 12 years, cutting 8,000 acres per year. But areas like this need special protection and should be permanently protected from logging,” Stant said. “Imagine how many other species are in forests that are being logged. They’ve done no inventory at all.” In his opinion, this inventory is just scratching the surface.

“In some measurements, Indiana has equal or greater diversity than the Amazon rainforests,” Stant said. “Relative to other forests and natural areas on the planet, it’s a very high level of biodiversity.” He said that old hardwood forests in Indiana have about

30 to 40 times more plants and animals than you'd find in the western United States.

"Indiana has a storehouse of biodiversity," Stant said. "It exceeds almost any other forest in the country. It needs to be appreciated."

Stant said that while most people think about biodiversity being eliminated when tropical rainforests are logged and developed, it happens in old hardwood forests too.

"There are probably 30 million more insect species on the planet that remain to be identified," Stant said. "Scientists believe they live mainly in the Amazon rainforests and in old hardwood forests."

Stant said his team's main goal is to bring about awareness of the biodiversity in the area.

"There's a lot more that's happened besides what I mentioned, but we can't reveal all our findings until the DNR has had a chance to review them," Stant said.

According to the Indiana Forest Alliance press release, the alliance has led the Ecoblitz from the beginning, and they've worked with like-minded organizations such as the Hoosier Environmental Council, the Knob and Valley Audubon Society, Hoosier Chapter Sierra Club, Hoosier Herpetological Society, Southcentral Indiana Chapter of the Indiana Plant and Wildflower Society and the Hoosier Mushroom Society.

Reports from the first two years of the study can be found at <https://indianaforestalliance.org/ecoblitz/>. The Forest Alliance is currently awaiting permission from the Indiana Department of Natural Resources to release its most current findings.