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Michael Smith of Pine Hill Park is presented with a bat box made by teacher Nicole Joyce's second-grade students at Rutland's Northeast Primary School. The students donated five of the bat boxes to Pine Hill Park.

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Northeast School students saving bats

By **CRISTINA KUMKA**
 STAFF WRITER

A class of 19 students at Northeast Primary School are saving the bats, just in time for Halloween.

With the help of some interested locals and a state bat expert, the school's 7-and 8-year-olds learned that bats weren't scary. In fact, they prevent backyards from being overrun with bugs and they help farmers keep pests away from their crops.

And they are actually shy creatures who don't fly into your hair, said student Jenna Menard during

a presentation in Nicole Joyce's class Friday.

The students presented a real-world application of what they learned: bat boxes built and created to shelter the bats in the spring and summer from the elements and a life-threatening disease.

Joyce, the class's second grade teacher, knew something was going on with the species nationwide. She had heard of white-nose syndrome in the news and wanted to integrate it into her lesson planning.

A recent study published in Science magazine estimates that the

value of pest control provided by bats each year is at least \$3.7 billion nationwide.

The little brown bat has been listed as endangered in Vermont.

Joyce contacted Pine Hill Park's Michael Smith, her friend Dan Nelson and Jason Tabor of building supply company LaValley Middleton Building Supply.

She got reading resources on bats from Beth Coughlin at the Rutland Town School.

And she contacted the Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department.

State wildlife technician Alyssa

Bennett came to the classroom and shared her knowledge of the threatened species.

She showed the bright-eyed students what was really going on in their environment, and it wasn't pretty for little brown bats.

A fungus called white-nose syndrome has devastated caves in North America. It was discovered in 2007 and has since killed more than one million bats in the population.

Bennett showed the students

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what a cave looked like over the course of three years — from being full of furry bats to empty.

"This is waking the bats in the middle of winter out of hibernation because they are so hungry and thirsty. The problem is that they cannot find any food or water so they die. White-nose syndrome is killing 97 percent of the bats," Jenna read during the presentation.

The students learned what they could do to help, so they made temporary homes for bats, pieces of wood crafted into a flat house with a hollow inside, painted black.

Tabor donated the wood and Nelson crafted a dozen basic boxes. The students, many from other classes, painted the boxes and wrote their school symbol and names on the outside.

Smith will put five of the simple creations in Pine Hill Park at the trailhead and around Rocky Pond.

The students told him bats like to live in the homes up high to ward off predators and near water so they can swoop down for water and to eat bugs.

The boxes are black so they absorb the sun and keep the creatures inside warm, the students said.

More importantly, each box holds 300 bats, hopefully keeping them safe from the spread of the fungus.

Joyce said the students learned geography, what states the bats travel to in the winter to find their caves, math, in calculating the number of bats they could save with each bat box and empowerment, by standing up in front of the class and presenting their work.

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And helping to solve a problem in their world, Joyce said.

"Every child participated no matter what level they were on," Joyce said. "Kids can make a difference and if we work all together, the whole community can make a difference."

The students also learned the power of thanks, writing thank you cards with bats on them to each of the locals who helped.

"This is, by far, the best unit I have taught," Joyce said.