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Va. moves toward honoring big-eared bat

By Larry O'Dell



Feb. 10, 2005 | Richmond, Va. -- Legislation honoring the Virginia big-eared bat moved one step closer to passage Wednesday.

On a unanimous voice vote, the state Senate General Laws Committee endorsed Del. Jackie T. Stump's bill designating the endangered species as the official state bat. Stump, D-Buchanan, said the idea was offered by the Virginia Cave Board as a tool for educating Virginians about caves and the creatures that inhabit them.

Stump said a bat can devour 600 mosquitoes per hour, helping prevent the spread of West Nile virus. However, Cave Board member Claire Ward said the Virginia big-eared bat prefers moths.

The Virginia big-eared bat can be found in caves in mountainous areas of Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky and North Carolina. Ward said about 1,500 to 2,200 live in Virginia.

At least one other state, Texas, has an official bat: the Mexican free-tailed bat.

Sen. Walter Stosch, R-Henrico, said he was reminded of the 1993 session when then-Del. George Grayson of James City County proposed legislation naming an official state fossil: *Chesapecten jeffersonius*. Grayson was asked what other fossils were in contention.

"He said, 'Two delegates and a senator,'" Stosch said.

Virginia already has 16 "official" emblems, including the state fish, brook trout; the state beverage, milk; and the state bird, cardinal. The dogwood is both the state tree and the state flower.

The list has not been expanded since 1993, when the fish and fossil were added. "Carry Me Back to Old Virginia" was essentially retired as the state song in 1997 when it was designated "state song emeritus."

Not all bills creating new state emblems have encountered as little resistance as Stump's. In recent years, the Legislature has rejected bills to name the eastern box turtle the state reptile and Pamunkey soil the official state soil.

If Stump's bill makes it through the Senate, it must be signed by Gov. Mark R. Warner to become law.

Asked the governor's position, Warner spokeswoman Ellen Qualls said he "probably will go to bat for the bat."

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