Underground
Baton Rouge

David Rascall, DPW waste water collection systems manager, paddles an aluminum boat into position to pick up other members of the inspection crew.

DPW inspectors go with the flow below

Editor's note: Underground storm drains can contain poisonous gases and other dangerous hazards. Unauthorized people should never enter storm drains.

Photographs and Story by MARK SALTZ

Several times each year, inspectors examine water flow freely through the system. They also repair leaks that would allow raw sewage to get into the storm drains.

Pipes of different shapes and sizes, ranging from 6 inches to 16 feet in diameter, crisscross East Baton Rouge Parish underground storm drain system for inspection and preventative maintenance.

While bats aren't encountered all that often, Rascall says an inspector must decide whether to use lights, which stir up the bats and cause them to fly at the light, or turn off the lights, which can cause the bats to become less visible to inspectors in the dark to deal with other conditions.

"You may not be aware of the order before you have already bitten you," said Rascall. "At least with the snapping, if you can see them, you can shoot them. In other words, it's spooky."

The lack of fresh air combined with retrofit chemicals and decomposing organic matter creates highly stagnant or polluted tools, excluding toxic gases. Inspectors use gas detectors to check for gas of 61 percent oxygen or lower levels. The hand-held device also measures acceptable oxygen levels.

While checking the storm drains for leaking sewer lines, DPW engineer Ira Miller inspect a break in the concrete street sewer head.