

## **HOW ABOUT BATS?**

By E. Harry Ofverstedt

Chances are that you have several birdhouses in your yard, for who could imagine a garden where the birds did not interact. Lately it has become more and more popular to install butterfly houses in the garden as well, but I bet very few if any of us have a bat house installed. It might just be that we should consider creating a habitat for those winged creatures, for they do more for us than we may realize.

Since childhood we have been conditioned to believe that a bat is an ugly and scary thing, mainly associated with Count Dracula and the night, ready to pounce it's rabies infected self on anybody venturing outside after dark. Nothing could be further from the truth.

While the face of a bat is often such that only a mother bat could love, the incidence of infected bats is actually lower that of the general wild animal population. Secondly, most bats are insectivorous. Some bats will eat seeds and fruit, some specialize their diet to frogs and fish and some live strictly on nectar, but very few of the more than a thousand various species of bats are carnivorous. The vampire bat comes to mind, but it lives almost exclusively of the blood of cattle and related animals.

It does not suck the blood from these "victims" as has been assumed, but rather lick from a slight painless wound it causes. As the vampire bat lives strictly in Latin America, this little creature does not represent a local nuisance.

The common bat will eat about its own weight in insects at each of its nightly forages and is as such an important controller of night flying bugs, including the nasty mosquito. Imagine how the night sky would buzz were it not for the bat!

In certain parts of the world the bat is an important pollinator. The desert in our Southwest depend on the nectar feeding bats to pollinate such plants as the organ pipe cactus as well as the giant saguaro. It might interest those of you who are found of Margaritas that the tequila so essential to this drink is produced from the agave or aloe succulent, a plant that is absolutely dependent of the bat for its pollination.

Bats come in all kinds of sizes, ranging from the tiny bumblebee bat, weighing less than a penny to the giant flying fox who can have a wing span of nearly six feet. While most bats will only produce one baby per year, the population is maintained by longevity, as some bats live as long as 30 years.

They can cover a great deal of distance when flying at a rate of speed about 40 miles per hour. The Mexican free-tailed bat can fly at a two-mile elevation, sometimes reaching a speed of 60 miles per hour. While some bats migrate seasonally, many are content to hibernate when the weather outside is too cold for bugs to be flying around.

While hibernating, the heart speed of the bat slows to 25 beats per minute, compared to the normal 400 beats.

It has been assumed that the bat is blind. While its eyesight cannot be compared to that of an eagle, they have adequate vision. Still, they locate almost all of their food by echolocation, the emitting of short bursts of ultrasonic sound. As the sound bounces back, the bat can tell the identity of its target. The fishing bat has an echolocation so sophisticated it can tell a minnow's fin protruding only two millimeters above a pond's surface.

Despite the fact that 50 million-year-old fossils indicate that the bat has been a resident of Earth for that many years, the mammal is at present declining at an alarming rate. Many species are in fact endangered, as human encroachment has eliminated previous bat habitats. In some areas of the country law protects the bat.

When you consider that one single brown bat can eat as many as 600 insects in one hour of foraging, you can appreciate how beneficial they are to us. That brings us back to the bat house. Maybe having one on the premises is a good idea after all.

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