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Nature News: Bats ~ Our Nocturnal Neighbors



Project Wildlife is in the midst of their "busy season" for bat rehabilitation. Photo Courtesy of Cindy Myers

By Angela McLaughlin - Julian Journal • Thu, Jun 14, 2018

The word "bat" may fill your mind with images of dark nights and cloak-wearing vampires. As bats are nocturnal creatures, they struggle to battle and overcome such negative perceptions.

However, bats are very beneficial to the environment and to humans. They may well be one of the most misunderstood and fascinating creatures that we share our landscape with, and San Diego County is home to 22 species of bats. With 47 known species in the United States, the number of bats found in our area is quite impressive.

"There are more than 1,300 species of bats in the world, and 70 percent of them eat insects," says Cindy Myers, bat team volunteer since 2002 with Project Wildlife in San Diego.

Myers adds that bats are more closely related to monkeys than mice, as is commonly thought. Most of the bats in the San Diego area are insectivores, with only a few nectar-feeding bats found in the southwestern United States. None of the species drink blood.

"Bats are one of the primary predators of nocturnal insect pests all around the world," says Myers. "One single bat can catch more than 1,000 mosquito-sized insects per hour."

In the San Diego area, Myers says that bats consume crop pests and arthropods such as moths, beetles, cicadas and even scorpions. Their consumption of insects can help prevent disease, such as the spread of West Nile Virus, and crop infestation. Nectar-feeding bats contribute to necessary pollination of different cactuses, flowering plants and trees. Even their droppings, or "guano," are used in the production of human antibiotics.

"Bats are often considered a 'keystone species' that are essential to some tropical and desert ecosystems. Without bats' pollination and seed-dispersing services, local ecosystems could gradually collapse as plants fail to provide food and cover for wildlife species near the base of the food chain," states Bat Conservation International.

It is sometimes assumed that bats are blind because they are nocturnal. While many species of bats use echolocation to search for their prey, they can still navigate using their eyesight. Having better nighttime vision than daytime, bats see in black, white and shades of gray.

"Bats are the only mammals capable of true flight. Bat wings contain the same bones as a four-fingered human hand," states the San Diego Zoo.

Project Wildlife receives anywhere from 50 to 75 bats per year for rehabilitation — and this time of year is their busy season. Myers says that females have migrated back to the area or come out of hibernation to form their maternity colonies, and baby bat season can begin as early as April. Many of the bats received at the center are juveniles that come into trouble after weaning and attempting to strike out on their own.

The lightweight bones in their hind legs cannot support the bats' bodyweight in an upright position, so bats roost upside down, and mother bats give birth in this position, catching the pup with her wings as it drops. Most female bats only give birth to one pup a year, and pups are born hairless, with their eyes closed, and unable to fly, clinging tightly to their mothers after birth.

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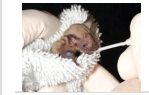
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"Bats are the slowest reproducing mammals on earth for their size, since most have only one pup per year," says Myers. "They are also the longest-living mammals on earth for their size."

She adds that females form maternity colonies each spring so they can give birth in a nursery-setting with other bats, helping them to stay warm and reduce the risk of dehydration.

"Nursing mother bats can literally eat thousands of insect pests around your garden and property, which is why many organic farmers put up bat houses specifically to attract these maternity colonies for natural pest control," says Myers.

On occasion, bats will move into an unwanted area, but Myers cautions against removing a bat colony during breeding season. This should be avoided until any newborn bats have matured enough to be on their own, which is in the fall.

"By mid-September, any bat pups that were born during the summer are full adult-size and learning to hunt insects with their mother," says Myers.

If later removal is desired, a professional should be contacted to avoid any complications or injury to humans or the bats. Precautions must be taken when handling wild animals, and bats should never be handled with bare hands. Myers advises using leather gloves or a thick towel to safely contain a bat in a box with a lid and small air holes before calling a local wildlife rescue facility.

The County of San Diego's Health and Human Services Department states that bats test positive for rabies more frequently than any other animal in San Diego County.

"Any direct, skin-to-bat contact should be carefully evaluated by a health care provider in consultation with the local health department (Epidemiology Program)," states the County. "Bites and scratches from bats are extremely small and may not be noticeable. Even sleeping in the same room as a bat may present a risk."

Though bats test positive more frequently than other animals, Myers says, "Rabies is believed to be rare in bats, affecting less than half of one percent of bats each year."

Learning more can help dispel any lingering fear or myths about these helpful but often misunderstood critters.

If you're patient and observant, you may get a chance to watch them on their nightly insect patrol and listen to their high-pitched call as they fly through the air — take this moment to appreciate our nocturnal neighbors.

How You Can Help Bats

- Set up bat boxes. Visit www.batcon.org for instructions.
- Never remove or disturb a bat colony during breeding season.
- If you own a pool, invest in a FrogLog so small animals can self-rescue. Visit <https://froglog.us>.
- Turn off outdoor ceiling fans at night (those on porches, in barns, etc.).
- Keep your yard pesticide-free.

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