

Bats



Merlin D. Tuttle

Things That Move in the Night

Most things people think they know about bats aren't even true. Bats are not blind, they aren't flying mice, and they won't get tangled in your hair. Unfortunately, we've let our ignorance jeopardize one of the earth's most valuable assets: bats play key roles in a wide variety of ecosystems around the globe, from rain forests to desert. The best protection we can offer these beneficial animals is to learn and share the truth about them.

There are nearly one thousand kinds of bats. They constitute almost a quarter of all mammal species and come in an amazing variety — big-eared, sucker-footed, ghost-faced, spotted, woolly, spectacled — from the world's smallest mammal to giant flying foxes with up to six-foot wingspans!

Except for the most extreme desert and polar regions, bats live in almost every habitat worldwide, just as they have for more than 50 million years. But bat populations are persecuted and in severe decline nearly everywhere, victims of human misinformation and fear.

Bat Conservation International (BCI) has been teaching the truth about bats since 1982. Once you begin

learning about bats yourself, you'll see why people all over the world are working with BCI to preserve our natural heritage by protecting these vital animals.

Did You Know That...

Not only do bats see as well as other mammals, they also use echolocation to detect objects as fine as a human hair in total darkness.

Bats carefully groom themselves. They are among the cleanest of animals and are also exceptionally resistant to disease.

Like all mammals, an occasional bat may contract rabies, but even sick bats are typically nonaggressive and will bite only if handled. Simply DO NOT HANDLE BATS, and you needn't fear them.

Though bats are long-lived (some up to 34 years), they reproduce slowly, most species bear and nurse just one pup a year.

Vampire bats live only in Latin America and represent less than one third of one percent of bat species. More than two thirds of bats eat insects, about one third eat fruit or nectar, and roughly

one percent eat fish, mice, frogs, or other small vertebrates.

Bats are Vital to the Balance of Nature From deserts...

Nearly 100 species of agave plants and cacti, including organ pipe and saguaro, are pollinated by bats.

to rain forests...

Approximately half of all rain forest mammal species are bats. By pollinating flowers and dispersing seeds, bats are responsible in some tropical forest areas for up to 98 percent of early reforestation on cleared land.

and many places in between.

Bats help keep vast numbers of night-flying insects in balance. Bat droppings in caves support whole ecosystems of unique organisms, including bacteria useful in detoxifying wastes, improving detergents, and producing gasohol and antibiotics.

Bats are Agricultural Allies

Bats are primary predators of beetles, moths, leafhoppers, and other insects that cost farmers and foresters billions of dollars every year. They also devour mosquitoes in our backyards.

The 20 million Mexican free-tailed bats that live in Bracken Cave in Central Texas eat 200 tons of insects in a single midsummer night.

A colony of just 150 big brown bats can eat enough cucumber beetles each summer to protect local farmers from 33 million rootworms, pests that cost up to a billion dollars annually.

More than 450 commercial products, including fibers, dyes, fuel, medicine, and timber, come from bat-dependent plants.

Bats are important pollinators of agave plants, from which all tequila is produced.

In the wild, bananas, mangoes, peaches, dates, figs, cloves, and carob all rely on tropical bats.

Bats are Endangered

Bat populations are in alarming decline worldwide. In North America, bats are the most endangered land mammals; more than half of all species are listed as endangered or are official candidates.

Like most animals, bats suffer from habitat loss and environmental pollution, but the primary cause of their decline is wanton destruction by humans.

Bats form the largest and most vulnerable colonies of any mammal. Vandalism in caves can kill millions at a time, severely threatening entire species.

Loss of bats increases the demand for chemical pesticides and jeopardizes whole ecosystems of other animal and plant species, including many we rely upon for our health, comfort, and economic well-being.

Bats Need Your Voice

You now know more about bats than most people on earth. So, please, share this information with others. Tell a friend. Teach a child (or a parent). Join us in exploring the fascinating world of bats by becoming a BCI member today.

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You can obtain more information about bats and BCI at www.batcon.org



Bat photo on facing page: Big Brown Bats, portrait, by Merlin D. Tuttle, Bat Conservation International
Bat photo on this page: Big Brown Bats, by Merlin D. Tuttle, Bat Conservation International
Background photo: Lance C. Bell, early morning at Green Ridge State Forest