Living with

Bats

by Anne Muraski

Do you like avocados, bananas, cashews, mangos or Tequila? Then give a bow to the bat, who has ensured the survival of these and many other popular plant resources. Throughout the tropics, the bat is nature's most important seed-dispersing animal, as well as the sole pollinator of countless trees and shrubs.

Here in the United States, entire desert ecosystems rely on nectar-feeding bats to pollinate keystone cactus species such as the organ pipe and saguaro. Bats are also the most important predators of night-flying insects—a colony of 500 little brown bats can catch a quarter million mosquitoes in a single hour! Bats detect their prey by sight and echolocation, a sophisticated sonar far superior to any that human technology offers. The absence of bats would jeopardize entire ecosystems, harm human economies and greatly increase pesticide use.

Bats are the second largest order of mammals, Chiroptera, with about 960 species, one in every four mammals is a bat. Primates—not rodents—are their closest relatives. They range from tiny, bumblebee-sized bats, the world’s smallest mammals, to the giant, fruit-eating flying foxes with six-foot wing spans.

While some species can live over 30 years, many produce only one offspring annually. This slow reproduction rate and their habit of collecting in groups makes bats very vulnerable to extinction. More than 50 percent of American species are in severe decline or are already listed as endangered. Worldwide, some bats are already extinct, and most of the largest bat colonies are already gone due to human disturbance of caves, habitat loss, pesticide poisoning, outright extermination, and commercial trade for food, aphrodisiacs and animal experimentation.

These gentle, vulnerable species need protection to survive. It is unlikely you’ll ever encounter a bat up-close, but if you do, you can help by following this advice.

**Bat flying in the house**

There is no need to panic; bats will not attack you or get stuck in your hair—all you have to do is help them find the way out. Exclude children and pets, close interior doors to confine the bat, and open all doors and windows to the outside. It’s not necessary to turn off the lights. Usually the bat will circle the room a few times, use its sonar and depart.

Stay near the walls, since a bat will lose speed and altitude near the center of the room after turning. (This is often misinterpreted as an “attack,” when in reality the bat is just trying to stay airborne.)

If the bat disappears, it has probably landed somewhere it can hang easily, like on curtains or upholstery. If you can’t find the animal, leave exits open and wait. The bat will leave shortly during daylight.

Bats are delicate and easily frightened, so avoid handling them. Leather work gloves (not cotton) should protect you from the bat’s tiny teeth, but be aware that the bat will probably squeak loudly and try to bite in self-defense. If the bat has landed on a curtain or wall and you cannot wait for it to leave, you can carefully cover the animal with a small container (cardboard, plastic or glass—cold metal may decrease body temperature and prevent flying) and gently work a piece of cardboard under the container to close the opening and trap the bat inside.

If it’s not on a flat surface, rescue the bat with a mailing tube or paper towel roll. Seal one end, position it near the frightened bat, and most likely it will crawl inside to hide. Transfer the bat outdoors to a tree or other high, safe perch (many bats need to fall from a height in order to take flight) away from cats and other predators.

If it’s not obvious how the bat gained entrance it may have been roosting within the outer walls or attic and accidentally found a route to your living space. If bats continue to show up for dinner, you might perform a room-by-room search for entry points: open spaces around plumbing and vents can be stuffed with steel wool, and air intakes may need a screen covering. Even cardboard or tape will work temporarily. Bats do not chew holes like rodents, so even if a colony cannot be excluded from structurally deficient walls or attics, you can easily exclude them from living areas.

**Bats roosting in the house**

The first sign of bat habitation might be rustling or squeaking in the walls, or a stain on the ceiling from accumulated droppings. While this might put some homeowners in emergency mode, chances are they have been living with the bats for years.

Attics are favorite roosting spots since they provide a warm place to raise young. Bats can squeeze through a slit less than an inch wide, so any small opening high on a house can provide access: vents, crevices by loose siding, space at the union of a dormer and roof, or openings around ill-fitting exhaust fans, window air conditioners, window frames or screens.

Evicting bats from your home is relatively easy, but it is not an overnight process. The good news is that bats do not gnaw wiring or enlarge existing holes, so structural damage is minimal. In the U.S., most bats leave their roosts in buildings during fall to hibernate, so you may be able to simply wait for their winter absence to seal entries, and skip the eviction process altogether.

Even if this is not the case, fall and winter is still the only time you should evict bats. *Never evict bats or any*...
wild animal from May through August when mothers are rearing offspring. Young bats cannot fly and will slowly starve without care, causing odor problems. Erecting a bat house before eviction may help the bats and your neighbors (see page one sidebar).

The first step in a successful eviction is to locate all the entry points. You might see a slight discoloration from the bats’ body oils near a well-used opening, or droppings on the ground (dry cylinders similar to mouse droppings). Carefully observe suspected entrances outside the house from before sunset until at least 30 minutes after. It only takes a second for a bat to exit, so get help to watch all sides of the house. It there are many entrances, seal all but the most obvious openings. Then outfit the most well-used entrances with a simple, one-way excluder made from clear—not cloudy—plastic sheeting (bats must be able to see out), or a fine netting with holes about one quarter inch wide (larger holes may entangle bats; smaller may hamper echolocation).

Attach the sheeting with duct tape or staples so it hangs one to four inches in front of the bat exit(s), and extends at least two feet below to and each side. If there is no protruding edging or cove nearby to hold the plastic away from the building, you will have to add a temporary wood strip, gathering netting as you attach it can help create space too. You can attach the sides to the building, but let the bottom hang free. Bats will drop down to leave, but will be unable to return.

All members of a colony may not leave each night, so keep excluders in place at least three days—a week in cool weather—before sealing entrances. During this time, continue to watch the house at dusk since bats may begin using new passageways. A visual inspection of the roosting site is best before sealing the last entrances.

In a way, animal “intruders” do us a favor by pointing out structural weaknesses and insulation leaks which could be costly down the road.

Bat on the ground

A bat on the ground during daylight may have fallen from a roosting site (many bats cannot take flight from the ground). Bats sleep during the day and often are incapable of flight for several minutes to an hour after waking, until their body temperatures rise. Cold weather may even induce a state of torpor, making the bat appear sick, lethargic or even dead. As they slowly wake they may squeak, hiss or bite to defend themselves.

If you find a grounded bat, cover the animal with a box, keep pets and children away, and call The SPCA for advice. Any wild animal that is approachable is more likely to be sick or injured. Depending on the situation, the solution may be as easy as moving the bat to a safe, high place where it can fly away at nightfall.

Bats roosting outside

Bats often roost in crevices outside the house such as under eaves and overhangs, around outbuildings or in nearby trees. As long as bats cannot gain entrance to the house, these sites should pose no problem. In fact, many people erect bat houses to attract bats for insect control.

Infrequently, a bat or group of bats may take up residence in a high traffic area near a door or under a porch roof. In this isolated instance the use of a spray cat or dog repellent can be useful. Spray the surface of the roosting site after the bats have left to forage at night. Never spray repellent when bats are present. Returning bats will choose a more desirable spot.

What not to do

- Do not evict bats or any wild animal from May through August when parents are rearing young.
- Do not poison your home by using chemicals, moth balls and other harmful repellents. They will only drive bats into your living space or cause them to die in the walls, creating odor problems. Poisons harm people, pets and wildlife. Ultrasonic sound generators thus far have been shown to be ineffective. Until you take care of the structural problems, there is nothing to stop other animals from moving in.
- "Pest control services" may not always use humane or environmentally safe methods. Bats should never be handled or physically removed from buildings, and there are no poisons or chemicals licensed for use against bats. The only safe, effective way to clear a roosting site is to allow bats to leave on their own, and then prevent re-entry by using exclusion devices and sealing entrances.
- Any mammal can potentially spread rabies. Wear protective leather work gloves if you absolutely must move a bat, or better yet, call The SPCA first. Bats are one of several wild animals including the fox, coyote, skunk and raccoon, which are considered to be rabies vector species in the United States. But unlike other animals, bats seldom become aggressive, so avoiding bat rabies is relatively simple: never pick up a bat with your bare hands.

When to get help

- If you find a bat on the ground, or cannot resolve your problem using these tactics, call The SPCA Wildlife Center for humane advice.
- If a person or pet is bitten by a bat, or any wild animal, feral cat or dog, seek immediate medical advice and call the local health department. If the bat or other animal cannot be retrieved, humans may require treatment, and pets may need to be quarantined to ensure their health and avoid possible transmission of rabies and other diseases. (Note: the modern rabies vaccine is relatively painless and very effective.) It’s easy to protect bats, wildlife, yourself and your pets: just keep a respectful distance from all wildlife, have your veterinarian vaccinate your animals, and do not allow pets to roam unchecked.