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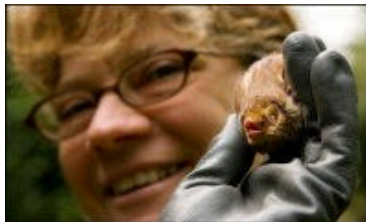
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Bats needn't give a fright

Creatures welcome bonus to environment

By LINDA LOMBARDI The Associated Press
Sat. Oct 18 - 8:57 AM



Virginia bat rescuer Leslie Sturges holds Peaches, a red bat, at Bat World NOVA in Annandale, Va. Sturges rehabilitates and releases injured and orphaned wild bats. (JACQUELYN MARTIN / The Associated Press)

NO NEED TO GO BATTY

Bats in the house? Don't panic.

"Take your time and think through

Enjoyed a margarita lately? Thank a bat.

Bats pollinate the agave plant that tequila is made from, as well as the avocados in that accompanying guacamole. Closer to home, you can also thank bats for fewer mosquito bites: A single bat eats hundreds of flying insects per hour.

Most people only think of bats when they're hanging decorations at Halloween, and consider them dangerous vermin — an opinion based entirely on myths and misconceptions. Bats are not flying mice, they don't want to fly into your hair, and only three out of the over a thousand species worldwide drink blood.

Statistically, you're less likely to die from rabies from

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the situation before you go flailing around," says Leslie Sturges of Bat World NOVA.

If there's a bat flying around your house and you've had no contact, confine it to a single room, open the window and keep out of its way. Make sure to watch so you know if the bat has exited.

Remember that the bat is at least as terrified of you as you are of it. It's not trying to attack you; it's panicked and wants to get away.

"People say 'it was coming right at me.' Well, if you're standing between it and the opening, it will come at you because it's trying to get out," says Sturges.

Don't try to chase and catch a bat. It has the advantage of wings.

"Chasing a small flying animal will only exhaust you," says Sturges. What's more, catching would mean touching and you should never touch any wild animal, no matter how small.

If you have had contact with the bat, or if a bat is found in the same room with a child or a person who's been asleep or otherwise incapacitated, call your local Department of Health.

Rabies is not common in bats, so there is no need to panic. However, the situation is generally treated with an excess of caution.

If there are bats roosting in your house, the website of Bat Conservation International, batcon.org, has detailed instructions on how to get them out. Note that merely trapping and releasing a roosting colony doesn't work, as bats can find their way

a bat bite than to be killed by a dog attack — which is itself less likely than being killed by lightning.

Still, some think just being near a bat is dangerous.

"I know plenty of people who've injured themselves in panicked fleeing from a bat when the bat itself wouldn't have hurt them," says Merlin Tuttle, bat expert, author and founder of Bat Conservation International.

For Leslie Sturges, every day is a bat day. She rehabilitates and releases injured and orphaned wild bats at Bat World NOVA rescue centre in Annandale, Va., and presents educational programs with a dozen long-term resident bats who can't be returned to the wild. What fascinates Sturges about bats is how they pack so much into such a tiny package.

"They have the kind of intellect, adaptations, social behaviours that you'd expect in a large mammal," she says. "And, on top of that, they fly!"

What's more, bats use echolocation — navigating by emitting high-frequency sounds and listening to the echoes that bounce back. They can locate an object as fine as a human hair in pitch darkness.

"What they're doing in that minuscule little brain case is so unique and incredible," says Sturges.

Bats can be great neighbours, as you can see in Austin, Texas, where Bat Conservation International is headquartered. A colony of 1.5 million Mexican free-tailed bats that roosts in the Congress Avenue

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home from a long distance.

The Associated Press

Bridge has become a major attraction, bringing about 100,000 people each summer to watch the bats emerge — standing within three metres or so of them

with no trouble, according to Tuttle.

In fact, we're more of a threat to them than they are to us. Like many animals, bats suffer from habitat loss due to human activity — and they're also threatened by our very fear of them.

"One of the biggest risks to bats is that people still panic at the sight of one and their first thought is to kill it," says Tuttle. Bats are particularly vulnerable because of their unique biology. Unlike most mammals their size, they reproduce slowly — most species have only one young per year. And because they live in such large groups, it's easy to wipe out millions in a single act.

Bats are also suffering from a mysterious new disease called white-nose syndrome that's spread through the U.S. Northeast in the past two years, nearly wiping out affected colonies. Some have compared it to the more well-known colony collapse of honeybees, and BCI is sponsoring emergency research into its cause.

"Any time you start having mass die-offs of animals as distantly related as bees and bats, it's time to sit up and take notice," says Tuttle. On the bright side, bats' habit of living in enormous groups means that one act of conservation can also make a huge difference, as in BCI's purchase of Bracken Cave in central Texas, home to 20 million free-tailed bats. As well as preserving the site for the colony, BCI plans to build a centre that will help to educate people about how valuable bats are — now more than ever, when everyone's thinking about going green and buying organic.

"Bats reduce pesticide use substantially," says Tuttle. Remember, he says: "Fewer bats, more pesticides."

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