

Bats Get a Bad Rep; Here's the True Story

Kristin C. Goodin, Barren County Extension Agent for Horticulture

Bats have a bad reputation that's largely undeserved. Although often associated with the spread of disease, vampire activities and assorted mental idiosyncrasies, bats actually serve an important function in nature.

The bats found in Kentucky feed exclusively on insects, primarily beetles, moths, and mosquitoes which often develop from larvae that are crop pests. By keeping these pest populations in check, bats actually serve a beneficial role in nature. The big brown bat, often found in old human dwellings, eats a lot of crop pests. The little brown bat can consume 600 mosquitoes in an HOUR! That might make a dent in the West Nile Virus spread.

Bats play a crucial role in the life cycles of many plants, especially in tropical areas. Some bats pollinate plants by going from flower to flower searching for nectar. Others eat ripe fruit, thus spreading plants as seeds pass through their digestive systems.

One misconception is that all bats spread rabies.

Less than one percent of all bats potentially have rabies. A bat contracts rabies by contact with another organism that is rabid. Once infected, the bat will die. A bat lying on the ground and behaving abnormally might be rabid so use caution when around a bat under these conditions.

Some people's apprehension might be connected to the nocturnal behavior of bats and some species' habitats. Bats are active at night. Some species live in dark, often cold places such as caves and mines that some people avoid visiting.

The mystical connection between bats and vampires originated in eastern Europe. It is associated with a Transylvanian prince named Vlad Dracul, who apparently treated people brutally. He also was known as 'the impaler' because he would put his subjects on spikes. The legend of Dracula evolved from this prince.

Although vampire bats do exist, all species occur in Central and South America, where they primarily attack birds, fowl and livestock. Rather than suck blood, these bats bite the victim and lap up blood with their tongues.

Bats or a form of their name, such as "bats in the belfry" or "batty," also are associated with various mental abnormalities, such as absentmindedness or eccentricity. Reference materials have varying information on the origins and first-time uses of these and similar terms.

Bats play a critical role in many systems in nature. Unfortunately, these mammals are viewed negatively because of various misconceptions. Bats aren't a threat to us. They provide many benefits that we wouldn't have otherwise. I hope people can begin to appreciate and understand bats.

For more information on bats and how to attract them to your backyard, please contact the Barren County Extension Service at 270-651-3818 and ask for the publication FOR-48 "Bats: Information for Kentucky Homeowners. It has plans for building a bat box and other tips on luring these mosquito-eating mammals to your backyard.

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