

Getting Past the Dark Ages: Bats and People

Bats

Bats — the very word conjures up images of evil, witchcraft, and sorcery.

“Wings of bat and eye of newt” are two major ingredients in a potent witches’ brew. Stealthily, bats stalk their prey on silent wings in the dead of night. They seek blood. They actively search out and terrorize people, particularly ladies with curly hair — or so the word of legends has it.

It is time to move beyond the thoughts and images of the dark ages. For centuries bats have been given a bad reputation and often destroyed simply because they were different from all the other creatures.

And they *are* different:

- They are mammals, yet they fly.
- They have wings but they are not birds.
- They are active at night and sleep upside down during the day.
- They look like mice but actually are more closely related to humans than to mice.
- They produce and interpret a fantastic complicated series of sounds that we cannot hear, let alone understand.
- They can navigate in complete darkness yet also use their eyes during the day.

These differences make them intriguing.

Our bat information is designed to set the record straight about bats. It provides solid evidence and scientific fact that bats are indeed worthy of our respect. It is hoped this will help replace the unjust image from myth and legend with a more responsible understanding of the facts about bats.

Bats and People: Letting Go of the Myths

Bats have had a long relationship with people. Bats have been characters in our stories and myths and ancient legends, often representing evil—a representation they do not deserve.

Fortunately a more understanding and appreciative view of bats emerged in recent years. Social attitudes towards these magnificent animals have improved now that we recognize:

- Bats provide environmentally-friendly insect control.
- Bats play a critical role in pollinating a wide range of plant species, including the giant saguaro (*Carnegiea gigantea*) of the deserts of southwestern North America.

- Bats are natural elements in many ecosystems and play an important role as predators of a variety of flying insects, many of which are pests for people, crops or forests.

In Alberta, it is illegal to molest, disturb, or destroy bat hibernacula between September 1 and April 30. While bats are not protected by law in the province, they are a true indicator of environmental health and play a number of key roles in natural ecosystems. Their presence should be encouraged.

In situations where bats occur in buildings and are not wanted, there are simple non-lethal ways to remove the bats. For more information about bats and non-lethal control measures, see the following document, *Bat Control*, on the Sustainable Resource Development (SRD) website: <http://srd.alberta.ca/>

Also see the Alberta Bat Action Team page on the SRD website:

<http://www.srd.alberta.ca/FishWildlife/WildlifeManagement/AlbertaBatActionTeam/Default.aspx>

Bats are Hard to Find

Bats spend most of their life where people can't see them. In Alberta, they hibernate for six to seven months each winter and sleep in a concealed roost for up to 20 hours each day during the summer.

During August and September, you may get lucky and see some bats hanging on the outside of buildings. These exposed roosts are often on south-facing walls of red brick buildings, where the bats sleep during the day. The red bricks hold the heat and provide a rough surface for the bats to cling to. This behaviour is more common among juvenile bats in semi-urban and urban areas of central Alberta.

Another good place to look for bats is around street lights late on a summer evening. The bats can be seen swooping back and forth as they try to catch the bugs attracted to the lights.

However, for the most part, our bats are hard to find and generally do not bother anybody. They just go about their business of eating lots and lots of insects on warm summer nights.

Bats are Easy to Get Along With

Human health concerns associated with bats in Alberta are extremely low and easily can be avoided. Bats generally pose little or no threat to human health, although it is always wise to take precautions to avoid being bitten by a bat.

Bats do not indiscriminately attack people, nor are they particularly attracted to ladies' hair.

When bats roost in a building they do NOT chew insulation, electrical wires, or structural elements. Any damage to a building usually is minimal.

However, bats are not entirely blameless:

- Some bats have the annoying habit of roosting in or on occupied dwellings. This is not always appreciated by the people sharing the building.

- Bats produce large amounts of urine and faeces which may result in odor and damage to wooden surfaces.
- Young bats squeak incessantly when the females are away, and this is sometimes enough to drive people “batty.”

Where bats are roosting in areas or buildings accessible to children or where the owner is not willing to co-exist with bats, bat-friendly means of removing bats can be undertaken. For more information, see the following document, *Bat Control*, on the Sustainable Resource Development website: <http://srd.alberta.ca/>