



Bats have been among the unheralded victims of Gulf Coast hurricanes in recent years, reports *National Geographic News*. The storms destroyed countless old-growth, hollow trees, where many bats prefer to roost.

In east Texas, Bat Conservation International and a number of partners are testing a potential alternative to the oversized tree hollows favored by bats. Cinderblock towers being built at the Trinity River National Wildlife Refuge that are designed to mimic hollow trees, reporter Brian Handwerk writes. Observations so far suggest these still-experimental artificial roosts are proving attractive to bats that face dwindling habitat.

Bats are rapidly losing vital habitat worldwide, and BCI, volunteers, government agencies, environmentally conscious corporations and many others are working to provide new homes for displaced bats.

Why all this effort? The popular online news site reports that “biologists stress that bats provide many ecological benefits and that their bad reputation is largely a matter of misinformation.”

Conservationists point out the flying mammals’ great value to both natural ecosystems and human economies. They pollinate plants, distribute seeds and devour huge amounts of moths, mosquitoes and other insects. Because of their voracious appetites, *National Geographic News* said, “bats function as extremely effective and pesticide-free pest control.”

Bat biologist Meg Goodman of Texas Parks and Wildlife told the *National Geographic News*, “Corn and cotton farmers spend millions spraying for (insect pests that Texas bats consume), and research finds that the bats save at least two (pesticide) applications per year.”

Ensuring that bats can find adequate roosts is good business. The Texas Department of Transportation, Handwerk writes, “currently outfits dozens of bat-friendly bridges per year.”

Such bridges, Goodman said, usually have crevices that are about three-quarters of an inch wide and 16 inches deep – just the right size for bats.

The model for bat-friendly bridges is the Congress Avenue Bridge in Downtown Austin, Texas. When it was renovated in the 1980s, deep, narrow crevices between box beams unintentionally provided ideal roosts for bats. One and a half million bats move into the bridge crevices each summer and tens of thousands of human tourists come to see them. The tourists add approximately \$10 million a year to the local economy.

“It has really become integrated into the culture,” said BCI Science Officer Barbara French told the *National Geographic News*. “Even the hockey team is named the Ice Bats.”

Artificial habitats, whether bridges, cinder-block towers or wooden bat houses are often invaluable, but the *News* concludes, “protecting traditional roosting sites may be the most critical step conservationists can take.”

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