

Bats in the News



Bats always come out around Halloween – at least in the news media, where feature stories about bats are especially popular this time of year. They vary wildly in quality, but one of the best bat stories of Halloween 2008 comes from The Associated Press and appeared in newspapers around the United States.

It begins: “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.”

Reporter Linda Lombardi interviewed Bat Conservation International Founder/Executive Director Merlin Tuttle and others to document the point of her article: “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 over a thousand species worldwide drink blood.”

She quotes Tuttle noting that “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.”

Instead, The AP says, “Bats can be great neighbors, as you can see in Austin, Texas.” The article describes the famous colony of one and a half million bats that spend summers under the Congress Avenue Bridge downtown as a major attraction. It draws about 100,000 people each summer to watch the bats fly out to begin a night of hunting pesky insects.

The article also quotes Leslie Sturges, who rehabilitates and releases injured and orphaned wild bats at Bat World NOVA rescue center in Annandale, Virginia. “What fascinates Sturges about bats is how they pack so much into such a tiny package,” Lombardi writes. “They have the kind of intellect, adaptations, social behaviors that you'd expect in a large mammal,” she says. “And, on top of that, they fly!”

Sturges describes bats’ uses of echolocation as they navigate by emitting high-frequency sounds and listening to the echoes that bounce back. That, the article notes, lets them to locate an object as fine as a human hair in pitch darkness. “What they're doing in that miniscule little brain case is so unique and incredible,” says Sturges.

Tuttle warned that bats are particularly vulnerable because, unlike most mammals their size, they reproduce slowly, with females of most species produces a single pup per year. And because they often live in very large groups, “it's easy to wipe out millions in a single act.”

But “on the bright side,” Lombardi writes, “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 millions of Mexican free-tailed bats. As well as preserving the site for the colony, BCI plans to build a center 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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