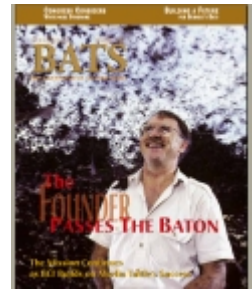


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The Founder Passes the Baton
A lifetime of Bats and Science
Robert Locke



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Merlin Tuttle, who founded Bat Conservation International in 1982 and spent the last 27 years building it into the leading defender of bats worldwide, is stepping back from his leadership role. Merlin resigned as President/Executive Director on May 31. He remains a valued part of BCI, assuming the title President Emeritus and continuing on BCI's Board of Trustees.

Merlin and John Mitchell, Chair of the BCI Board of Trustees, jointly expressed their confidence that "this transition in leadership will go smoothly, and BCI can look forward to impressive achievements in the years ahead." The search for a new Executive Director has begun. BCI's current Management Team, with the support of the Board of Trustees, will oversee the organization in the interim.

This planned transition is part of BCI's Strategic Planning Initiative, begun more than a year ago to develop a blueprint to help the organization build on its successes and move vigorously into the future. Merlin, 68, began a one-year sabbatical leave to pursue personal projects, including writing his memoirs. He will also work on select projects with BCI, including efforts to deal with the crisis triggered by White-nose Syndrome.

Merlin Tuttle's fascination with bats "and with science" really took hold in 1959, when, as a teenager, he discovered a colony of gray myotis in Baloney Cave, a few miles from his Tennessee home.

Scientific texts back then reported that gray myotis (*Myotis grisescens*) remained in the same favored caves year-round. Merlin, as he would often do in later years, questioned the conventional wisdom. He studied the bats, explored the cave and even attached bat bands from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to hundreds of them. That winter, he found dozens of his banded bats in another cave 100 miles (160 kilometers) north. While still in high school, Merlin proved for the first time that gray myotis migrate between summer roosts and winter hibernation sites, some traveling north rather than south, as expected.

That led to a lifetime of dedication to conserving these wondrous and invaluable flying mammals. And it led to BCI.

"Merlin Tuttle has probably directly contributed more than anyone else to the conservation of bats," says Brock Fenton, Biology Chair at the University of Western Ontario. "Quite simply, he turned his fascination with them and his love of them into a lifelong campaign to effect their conservation at home and abroad. His name is, appropriately, synonymous with bats."

Merlin's gray myotis research continued for two decades and included his Ph.D. dissertation in population ecology at the University of Kansas. And along the way, he made another discovery that charted the course of his life: gray myotis colonies were being devastated by humans at a frightful rate.

“You're too late,” old-timers often said when Merlin sought information on local bat caves. “When I was a child, clouds of bats filled the sky. You should have been here back then. They're all gone now.”

The culprit, he found, was ignorance. Hardly anyone had any inkling of the many ecological and economic benefits of bats. And most people, their attitudes shaped by myths, misinformation and baseless fears, despised bats as dangerous and sinister pests.

Not only were countless bats of many species being lost to disappearing habitat, pesticide poisoning and similar dangers, but some cave owners and visitors intentionally killed incredible numbers of bats, sometimes even igniting conflagrations that burned or suffocated all the bats inside. The story was much the same almost everywhere Merlin went in North America and around the world. Bats were feared, reviled and casually destroyed.

Merlin Tuttle devoted his long and productive career not only to learning about bats, but to sharing the facts about these essential creatures around the world.

“At a time when most bat species were considered to be ugly and vile, Merlin singularly shaped public perceptions about bats,” says Thomas H. Kunz of the Center for Ecology and Conservation Biology at Boston University. “Over the years, he has passionately influenced a host of students and colleagues around the world on the ecological values of bats.”

“Merlin is a pioneer,” says John Mitchell, chairman of BCI’s Board of Trustees. “When he started, most of the world was unaware of how important and how threatened bats are. He made the rest of us aware of their great value, and that had a multiplier effect as other conservation organizations signed on.”

“Quite frankly,” Merlin wrote 17 years ago, “the founding of BCI came as an act of desperation. It was obvious that without major improvement in public attitudes, the situation for bats would continue to worsen.” Merlin and a few other scientists studying bats raised the alarm. They were largely ignored as even established environmental groups showed little enthusiasm for championing such unpopular animals. Bats just couldn’t compete with baby seals and pandas.

Many years ago, recalls biologist Richard LaVal of Costa Rica, Merlin told him and other bat biologists of “his plan to create an organization for the conservation of bats. The rest of us felt that it was going to be very difficult to get people to donate money to save bats because they had a very bad public image at the time. Nevertheless, we encouraged him. I, for one, knew that if anyone could do it, Merlin could, because he was a natural-born salesman. The rest is history!”

Merlin founded BCI on March 12, 1982, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, while he was Curator of Mammals at the Milwaukee Public Museum. The struggling organization with virtually no money was a nights-and-weekends enterprise. Verne Read, one of BCI's earliest friends in Milwaukee, was a founding board member and crucial supporter. He now serves as Chairman Emeritus, while his son, Thomas Read, is an active member of the board.

The philosophical foundation of BCI was rooted in Merlin’s work with gray myotis. A Tennessee farmer, in agreeing to let Merlin study the bats in his cave, added: “While you’re in there, kill as many of them as you can.” Merlin let the comment slide, but upon entering the cave, he found the floor littered with the discarded wings of potato

beetles, an especially destructive crop pest. “When I returned with a handful of the colorful wings, the farmer understood immediately that the bats were eating his most-feared pests. The next time I visited, that farmer was actively protecting his bats.”

When people understand bats’ enormous benefits, Merlin realized, their disdain can be transformed into appreciation and bat conservation can become a reality. Public education became the centerpiece of BCI.

The organization’s earliest efforts were mostly educational, including the audiovisual program, Saving America’s Bats and a Bats and Their Conservation brochure, both funded by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, as well as a bat-education booklet, The Most Famous Bat in the World, published by BCI supporter Bacardi Imports. Merlin was also featured prominently in several national publications and television programs.

BCI, still short on financing but with a growing list of conservation and education activities, moved to Austin, Texas, in 1986. At the time, Merlin notes, Austin “was generating more negative publicity about bats than any other city in America.” Hundreds of thousands of Mexican free-tailed bats had moved into crevices beneath the remodeled Congress Avenue Bridge downtown, much of the populace was in a panic, and news media around the country were taking an interest. “Mass fear in the air as bats invade Austin,” screamed a local newspaper headline, as many residents demanded the bats’ extermination.

But after a tireless education campaign that saw Merlin meeting with city officials, news media, neighborhood groups and schoolchildren, the fears gradually subsided. Today, the summer emergences of 1.5 million “Bridge Bats” draw many thousands of visitors each year and generate an estimated \$11 million in local revenue. Austin proudly calls itself the Bat Capital of America. Knowledge is a powerful force.

Public understanding of bats makes so much else possible, and Merlin has always been ready to teach. Fiona Reid, a biologist, author and artist, has accompanied Merlin as co-leader of Founder’s Circle ecotours in Zambia, Madagascar, the Amazon, Australia and New Zealand, and Uganda. Although surrounded by some of BCI’s leading supporters, Merlin “never passes up an opportunity to talk to villagers, to show bats to children that gather around him, and to take time out of an already hectic schedule to spread the word that bats are a precious and valuable resource,” she said. “Merlin has done more for bat conservation than any other living being, and I am proud to have been able to assist him on some of his international voyages.”

Even before launching BCI, Merlin became distressed at the quality of the bat photographs that illustrated his articles. “I was appalled that nearly all showed snarling bats, a posture bats display only in self-defense. More than any other medium, photography showing the true nature of bats helps people begin to appreciate and understand them. So I decided to learn to photograph bats.”

In fact, he became a world-class wildlife photographer and his images have been crucial to BCI’s education efforts. The impact is not lost on his scientific colleagues.

Gary McCracken Ecology and Evolutionary Biology Chair at the University of Tennessee says he features a classic Merlin photo (below) of a Mexican free-tailed bat (*Tadarida brasiliensis*) with a corn earworm moth in its mouth “in every talk I give on the ecosystem services of bats. Usually, it is the first slide I show. While I can easily talk for

hours about the value of bats, this one picture of Merlinâ€™s is worth more than my thousands of words.â€

The way â€œthis photo captures a message is a testament to Merlinâ€™s genius. The message is simple: bat eats insects. When people know that this bat is one of the millions of free-tailed bats that feed each night over crop fields, and that corn earworms are the most destructive agricultural pests in America, the message becomes profound. Photos like this, and the many thousands of other amazing photos of bats that Merlin Tuttle has taken over the last 40 years, have been a major factor in Merlinâ€™s success in presenting a positive image of bats to more people than anyone in history.â€

Education for Merlin and BCI also means nurturing new generations of bat biologists through the Student Research Scholarship fund.

â€œAlthough Merlin has been known above all for his immense contribution to bat conservation, his creative and organizational activities reach far beyond that,â€ says BCI Science Advisor Jiri Gaisler, Professor Emeritus at Masaryk University in the Czech Republic. â€œNo one else has done so much to promote knowledge of bat habitats worldwide. He organized (and took part in) the education of countless people about the importance of bats for us humans and the unique role bats play in ecosystems.â€

Australian Biologist Greg Richards, a member of BCIâ€™s Scientific Advisory Board, cites scholarships as part of the reason that â€œthere are not many people in the bat world who havenâ€™t been touched or influenced by Merlinâ€™s constant diligence. It was always a delight for me to review the applications for scholarships from around the world, especially those from kids in developing countries. Through this, you could see the result of Merlinâ€™s efforts.â€

Since the program began in 1990, BCI has awarded 275 scholarships totaling \$674,798 for research conducted in 58 countries, from Argentina, Cambodia and Cameroon to Uganda, Ukraine and Vietnam. These are competitive awards judged by top researchers from outside BCI, and the scholars represent some of the most promising young bat scientists in the world. Many BCI Scholars already have become leaders in bat science and conservation.

The Global Grassroots Conservation Fund, meanwhile, has provided \$183,435 in grants for 73 local conservation projects in 40 countries. These small grants, which average about \$2,500, tap the enthusiasm of local volunteers to cultivate the seeds of bat conservation around the globe. Educating children, farmers and communities about the value of their bats has always been an integral part of Global Grassroots efforts.

Educational books, brochures, videos, audiovisual productions and classroom curricula developed by BCI and its partners are teaching facts about bats around the world. BCI workshops have taught bat-related research, conservation and management techniques to more than 1,400 biologists, wildlife and land managers and other professionals from 23 countries; many are now leaders in bat conservation.

And from its earliest days, BCI has emphasized cooperation over confrontation, building alliances and partnerships with industry, government agencies and other organizations.

Working with members, friends and many public and private partners, BCI sparked creation of the American Samoa National Park to protect flying foxes; helped install

bat-friendly gates on more than 1,000 American caves and mines to protect millions of bats; purchased and protects Bracken Cave near San Antonio, summer home to the world's largest colony of bats, 20 million Mexican freetails; led continuing work to ensure safe and stable water supplies for bats in arid western states; launched a major research program to mitigate the alarming number of bats killed by wind-energy turbines; and much, much more.

International initiatives have been a major part of BCI's conservation efforts since its beginnings. In 1982, its first year, BCI helped convince the government of Thailand to protect millions of free-tailed and fruit bats that were being decimated by poachers by hiring a game warden at the Khao Chon Pran Cave. BCI's most persuasive argument: Profits from guano mining, which supported a local monastery and school, had fallen by half because of the declining bat population.

Since then, BCI has sponsored varied conservation projects (in addition to Global Grassroots awards and scholarships) with partners in many countries. One recent addition to that list is Norma Monfort of the Philippines, whose family has for decades owned a cave with the world's largest-known population of Geoffroy's rousette fruit bats (*Rousettus amplexicaudatus*). Norma now is a tireless champion not just of that colony, but of bats throughout the Philippines.

“Whenever I am asked why I got into bat conservation, I become transformed into an animated storyteller,” she says. “People listen wide-eyed as they feel the excitement that I relive in recounting the details of such an incredible journey. The impact of having met and worked with Merlin D. Tuttle when he came to visit and assess the Monfort Bat Cave in June 2006 left an indelible impression, which grew into a formidable passion for the cause.

“To just say, “Thank you, Merlin, for all that you have done” confines the immensity of my gratitude and respect. Instead, continuing to successfully champion bat conservation in the Philippines is what will make him proud.”

Norma is now Executive Director of Philippine Bat Conservation, as well as President and Founder of Monfort Bat Cave & Conservation Foundation. Both organizations began after Merlin's initial visit.

Through it all, Merlin never forgot the gray myotis, which was, based on his research, officially listed as endangered in 1976. Largely through the efforts of BCI and its allies, this species is recovering strongly and seemed almost ready for graduation off the endangered list “at least until the appearance of White-nose Syndrome on the edge of its range. (Merlin played a lead role in organizing and funding a WNS Science Priority Meeting for top WNS scientists in New York in 2008 and worked with Tom Kunz of Boston University for a similar session in Austin last May. [See “WNS Goes to Congress” in this issue of BATS.]

Looking back over all those years, Senior Scientist Don Wilson of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History notes: “Merlin was among the first to recognize that all was not well in the world of bats, and among all of us working on bats at the time, he was the only one to take the bull by the horns and found his own NGO to do something about it.

“Watching Bat Conservation International grow over the years has been a pleasure for

all of us who worked with Merlin in some small way. The world of bats is a better place because of the efforts of Merlin Tuttle, and BCI has a strong and secure future thanks to him.â€

ROBERT LOCKE is Director of Publications at Bat Conservation International.

Tributes:

Merlin Tuttle has played a pivotal and historic role in the conservation of bats. He has crafted a program that blends cutting-edge science, outstanding outreach, amazing photography and professional advocacy to engage, inspire and motivate a global audience. For the past three decades, Merlin has been at the forefront of every important conservation issue facing bats. The world is a better place because of his work.

John P. Hayes, Chair, Department of Wildlife

Ecology and Conservation, University of Florida

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Bats have had no greater ally than Merlin Tuttle. Through his science, supernatural charisma and passion, he has reversed the public opinion of bats around the world. I have known Merlin the majority of my life and have been lucky enough to travel on many of his adventures. He has been a great friend and mentor, and I look forward to our continued relationship through BCI.

Bert Grantges

BCI Board of Trustees

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I have long respected Merlin for his practical approach to wildlife conservation. Merlinâ€™s approach and style has always been one of education and not admonishment, of the careful choice of words and, most importantly, of leading by a positive example.

Mark J. Bloschock, Vertex Engineering Inc.

People who excel at what they do are often really good at one thing. Merlinâ€™s one of those people with a variety of talents that heâ€™s really good at. My first impression was that this guyâ€™s a really good photographer. Then I realized heâ€™s a really good salesman and could talk you into doing just about anything. Merlin has a self-sacrificing drive deep in his heart and a sincere dedication that he must share. Add communication, conflict resolution and leadership skills and you have a rock-solid leader. And heâ€™s a darned good biologist, too.

Cal Butchkoski, Wildlife Biologist,

Pennsylvania Game Commission

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Probably no other biologist has done so much to influence others to study, and ultimately protect, a group of organisms as Merlin Tuttle has done for bats. I am proud to count myself as one of those who was influenced by Merlin to join BCI's "army" of scientists, students, laypeople and politicians who together fight for the protection of bats and all the other organisms that depend upon them.

Scott A. Mori, Nathaniel Lord Britton Curator

of Botany, The New York Botanical Garden

BCI and Merlin Tuttle have been unstinting in their support for bat conservation in southern Africa. Merlin's visit in 2000 was a memorable milestone in bat conservation in [South Africa] and provided huge impetus and positive media attention to fledgling South African bat groups. We deeply appreciate the kind and generous advice, inspirational talks and the wonderful portrait photographs of our bats [that he] freely provided.

Peter Taylor, Bat Interest Group of

KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa

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I can't believe what I'm reading, Merlin! I hope you don't go too far away. You are the soul of BCI.

Ramona Seeligson Bass, Fort Worth, Texas

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End of an era. You must be tremendously proud of your achievements at BCI and the advances you have made in bat conservation internationally. Your leadership in areas such as turbine issues, White-nose Syndrome and cave protection has been exemplary. The BCI Scholarship scheme has helped foster the research careers of many young scientists. It has always been a pleasure to work with you.

Gareth Jones, School Biological Sciences,

University of Bristol, United Kingdom

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When Merlin first moved to Austin, he stayed in our guest room for five or six months. Of course, we got really hooked on bats during that time "you know what a salesman he is. We gave a dinner party for him that year. Some of the earliest [BCI] board members came out of that party. Merlin had that effect on people. He's a magician. I'm just astounded at how much has happened since then.

Peggy Phillips, BCI Trustee 1986-2005

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Many scientists around the world are involved in various aspects of bat research, but no one on the planet has done more for bat conservation than Merlin Tuttle through BCI.

David A. Saugey, Wildlife Biologist,
Ouachita National Forest, Arkansas

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Those of us who work with bats continuously face the challenges of conveying their importance to skeptical audiences. It is hard to imagine how much more difficult those challenges would be had Merlin and Bat Conservation International not forged the path of education and conservation action on which we now tread.

Paul Cryan, Research Biologist,
USGS Fort Collins Science Center, Colorado

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The effect of Merlin's infectious enthusiasm for bats has been momentous for the huge and timely change in the image of bats among the general public of the United States.

Rodrigo A. Medellín, Instituto de Ecología,
Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

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Over the years, Merlin has passionately influenced a host of students and colleagues around the world on the ecological values of bats, ranging from cave ecosystems to tropical rainforests. Merlin's passion for bats is marked by his incredible photographic images that will continue to have positive impacts on the conservation of bats for years to come.

Thomas H. Kunz, Center for Ecology and
Conservation Biology, Boston University

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I had the good fortune to have a personal tour of Bracken Cave with Merlin and his family one fine summer evening. Streams of bats against a darkening evening sky lit by flashes of distant lightning and sunlit storm clouds. Merlin and I laughed with joy at the beauty and power of it all. When I think of Merlin, I acknowledge and respect the scientist, the visionary, the leader "and I will remember a summer evening in Texas and a man who delighted in the moment as the bats began to emerge from Bracken Cave.

Carol Lively, Wings Across the Americas Coordinator,
U.S. Forest Service International Programs

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In 1998, I met Merlin, I was impressed by his passion for bats and his scientific knowledge on Latin American bat ecology. Thanks to this visit, and together with other regional

initiatives, I decided I should try to do something similar and founded the Bolivian Bat Conservation Program. Merlin was a tremendous example for our newly formed program. We have received his constant support ever since. Merlin has always been a good friend and a key ally to our efforts to protect bats in the region.

Luis F. Aguirre, President, Bolivian Bat

Conservation Program; BCI Science Advisor

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When I drive over Congress Avenue Bridge with visitors, I point out the kiosk about bats, the bat sculpture and, of course, I tell them about how the emergence of these bats has become one of the major attractions of Austin. Then I tell them that before Merlin arrived, they were trying to figure out how to get rid of all those bats under the bridge. Now the fancy restaurants advertise that you can dine on the veranda and watch the bats emerge. All of that is because of Merlin.

Michael Ryan, Department of Integrative Biology,

University of Texas at Austin

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A few years after I joined the University of Aberdeen, my attempts to obtain grants and establish a research group in bat ecology were frustrated by the view widely held among British mammalogists that bats were too difficult to study. I persuaded the Mammal Society to allow me to devote a one-day meeting to bats and invited four North American colleagues to speak. They were Jack Bradbury, Tom Kunz, Brock Fenton and Merlin Tuttle. The meeting room of the Zoological Society of London was filled to capacity and included the graybeards who sat on grants committees. My next grant application was successful. I have always regarded that meeting as a turning point and remain grateful to my North American colleagues. A decade later, Merlin's trailblazing with BCI was a huge encouragement to those of us involved in establishing the Bat Conservation Trust in the UK.

Paul Racey, Regius Professor of Natural History

(retired), University of Aberdeen, United Kingdom

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Merlin, you've done more for bat conservation than anyone in history, and that is something that you (and all of us) should be proud of.

Bill Schutt, Biology Department

C.W. Post College of Long Island University

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As founder of the Bat Working Group for the National Military Fish and Wildlife Association, I was in need of support from an established bat-conservation organization to

encourage bat surveys and management programs on military installations. Through the efforts of Merlin and BCI, a Memoandum of Understanding was developed between BCI and Department of Defense. This document has been instrumental in promoting bat research and habitat improvement projects on installations throughout the country.

Chester O. Martin, Environmental Laboratory,
U.S. Army Engineer Research and Development Center

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I have never met anyone who has a better innate understanding of bat behavior than Merlin Tuttle. His direct experience working with bats all over the world and his intuitive understanding of just how to handle them are unequalled. Moreover, the impact of his conservation work has been felt throughout the world. There are few people who can truly identify the contribution they have made in their lives. With the creation of Bat Conservation International and decades of hard work, Merlin has really changed the way that people think about bats “ and by so doing has secured protection for decades to come.

Rachel Page,
Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute

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He is Merlin the Magician. It is sheer magic for someone to take on an animal group like bats and give them a totally new public image. Because of Merlin’s magic “ his great drive “ many, many people see bats today as charming, furry, innocent, cute, and most of all useful Heroes of the Ecosystem. This is a far cry from the image bats had: dangerous, rabies carriers, vampire bloodsuckers, witches’ companions, you name it. Not that bat problems are over, but now we have a model for what to do and Merlin is our role model.

Sally Walker, BCI South Asia Liaison (India);
Founder, Zoo Outreach Organization

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Without the information from BCI and your early and extensive support, the Cayman Islands Bat Conservation Program would have never existed. We now have over 90 bat houses, most of them successful, and efforts continue on all fronts including cave and forest conservation, rescue and rehab, as well as public education. “Thanks” is not a big-enough word for everything you have done for me and for bats everywhere.

Lois Blumenthal, Bat Conservation Program Director,
National Trust for the Cayman Islands

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Merlin, more than any other individual, has transformed the image of bats in the eyes of literally tens of thousands of people. We have him to thank for contributing directly, but

also for motivating many others to be advocates for these animals and be willing to stand up and speak to the valuable roles they play and the nonsense that perpetuates the myths that haunt them.

Mark Brigham, Professor,

University of Regina, Canada

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Many years ago, Merlin, when we first met, you lit a spark in me to learn all I could and put that knowledge to work in my great interest to build the best [bat] habitat that I know how. It is still lighting a fire in me to keep trying to build the best possible bat houses. I want to thank you for all youâ€™ve done.

Marvin Maberry, Bat Conservationist and

Founder, Maberry Centre Bat Homes

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BCI has become a world-recognized organization, the first place most people go for information on bats and their conservation. Under Merlinâ€™s leadership, BCI has instituted many valuable programs, not the least of which are the grant programs that support many young bat researchers and the numerous workshops that have stimulated many individuals to become advocates for bats throughout the world.

John O. Whitaker, Jr., Director,

Center for North American Bat Research and Conservation, Indiana State University

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Iâ€™ve known Merlin Tuttle for almost 30 years. After he burst on the scene at the National Geographic Society, I was his editor and advisor. Merlin is a remarkable character, fitting right in with the many other notable scientists who have received research grants from the Society, people like Jane Goodall, Louis and Mary Leakey, Dian Fossey â€” the list is long but exclusive. So why include Merlin? Not just because of his stature as a scientist, but also because he understood from the beginning that promoting bats and their importance was a vital key to our understanding of what really matters on our planet. Because of Merlin, in many areas of the world those traditionally loathed and feared creatures have become objects of admiration and awe. Which, come to think of it, is always how I've felt about Merlin himself.

Mary Smith, Senior Editor (retired)

The National Geographic Society

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