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Bat-house bats survive a hurricane's wrath

When Hurricane Ivan, one of the worst storms ever to sweep the Caribbean, battered the Cayman Islands last fall, the islands' bats suffered alarming losses. But their local champion, BCI Member Lois Blumenthal, reports all but one of the 27 innovative double bat houses she had mounted atop utility poles on Grand Cayman -survived the brutal winds, as did the thousands of bats inside them.

Sadly, most of the bats roosting in buildings were lost when countless roofs were blown away. Thus, she says, the bat-house residents now probably constitute the main population of Pallas's mastiff bats (*Molossus molossus*) on the islands.

Blumenthal, BCI's volunteer Caribbean Co-ordinator, has been working to build support for bat conservation since she moved to Grand Cayman a decade ago (BATS, Spring 2004). She has been supported in part by BCI's Global Grassroots Conservation Fund and has built an enthusiastic corps of volunteer helpers. The double bat houses were designed by a local carpenter to slip over the heavy-duty utility poles donated and installed by Caribbean Utilities Co. Ltd. The houses were built by inmates of the Cayman Islands Northward Prison.

Although many of the poles showed a bit of a tilt afterward, they stood up to 36 hours of winds that exceeded 165 miles an hour (265 kph), although she says all have now been sandblasted. Even the roof shingles, which had been glued and nailed, remained in place.

She and two helpers scrambled up ladders to repaint the houses "in place and with the bats inside, using thinned, water-based exterior paint and doing two coats very quickly." A preliminary test on one inhabited house showed no effect on the bats.

Blumenthal is not optimistic, however, about the fate of the islands' forest-dwelling bats, since trees on the southern coast were stripped almost completely bare. Even if the fruit-, nectar- and pollen-eating bats "managed to survive the storm itself," she said, "many may have starved to death afterward."

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