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Using Live Bats for Public Education

Intense public fear of bats is based mostly on groundless misunderstandings which are easily dispelled by a personal introduction to a live bat. Local insectivorous species often are easy to obtain and ideal for such purposes. The following suggestions are provided to assist educators, not to promote keeping bats as household pets.

Bats are most often caught in mist nets, but expert advice is required. Setting nets across small ponds or streams usually brings the best results. Do not violate state or federal laws, disturb bats in their roosts, or place nets too close to a roost entrance where emerging bats may swamp the net and be needlessly injured. If you accidentally catch an endangered species, release it. (*Bats of America*, by R. W. Barbour and W. H. Davis, 1969, contains a reliable key to species in the United States and Canada.)

Remove netted bats immediately and place each one in its own soft cotton bag—socks will do. Bats easily dehydrate, so keep the bags moist. To avoid bites, use a single leather glove, leaving one hand ungloved to untangle the netting. Many species have tiny teeth, hardly capable of breaking human skin, but there are exceptions. Most bats become gentle when they realize no harm is meant. Like people, their temperaments vary.

Obtaining bats through the local Humane Society or a pest control company is another alternative. Especially in July and August, these organizations may be willing to inform you when people call reporting unwanted bats in their homes.

If you find a grounded bat or one that is behaving abnormally (i.e. flying around in daylight), it may be sick. Leave it alone unless you are prepared to take the time to properly care for it. Such a bat must be isolated and handled ONLY with gloves until it recovers. It probably isn't rabid, but don't take a chance.

The new human diploid cell rabies vaccine for pre-exposure immunization is safe, highly effective and painless. If you are going to handle wildlife in countries where rabies exists, you should obtain this protection. There is little else to worry about, no more than from dogs and cats.

Most insectivorous bats can be caught for a specific program and released within 24 hours without requiring food. Species that hibernate will enter torpor to conserve energy. As soon as possible after capture, simply place their damp cloth bags in a shoe box in a refrigerator. They will become torpid until you arouse them.

Bats aroused while sheltered in your hand often tame and learn to eat and drink in captivity more rapidly. Gently hold the bat in your closed hand with just its head visible at the base of your thumb.

When the bat is fully awake, offer it water from an eye-dropper. It probably will drink. The next step, if you intend to keep it more than a day, is to tempt it to eat. Some will eat immediately while others will require special coaxing.

The most convenient food for captive insectivorous bats is mealworms. Those available in pet stores are usually expensive and not very nutritious. You can save money and purchase better quality worms in quantity from a supplier (for example, Grubco, Inc., Box 2001, Hamilton, OH 46015). Keep the mealworms frozen until you use them.

To teach bats to eat mealworms, sever the head of a thawed worm, hold it gently to the bat's lips, squeeze the worm's tail and allow the bat to taste the inner fluids. If this approach fails, use the severed end to prod the bat's muzzle, provoking it to bite the worm.

Once bats have learned to eat mealworms from your hand, most quickly graduate to taking them from a petri dish on the floor of their cage. Provide fresh water daily in a similar container, with one to two drops of multivitamins. Polyvisol multivitamin infant drops are recommended.

Bats will learn to eat and drink more rapidly if initially kept in a cage no larger than 2 ft. long by 1 ft. wide and high. Use vertically placed slabs of bark to provide shelter for undisturbed sleeping. Many bats will learn to return to their cages if allowed to emerge on their own into a larger room for exercise. However, places where bats could get lost, including air vents and spaces under doors, must be covered.

The number of mealworms you should feed a bat varies according to season, temperature, bat size and amount of exercise. Avoid over-feeding, though a 30% weight increase in winter is normal. A bat's weight when captured may be a good indicator of its usual size. A Big Brown Bat weighing about 14 grams in summer and 18 grams in winter, required 6-14 large mealworms daily in summer and 1-4 weekly in winter. It exercised (flew) about 5-15 minutes each evening and was maintained at room temperature. In the United States, the following bats have done well in captivity: Big Brown, Little Brown, Pallid, Silverhaired, Eastern Pipistrelle and Mexican Free-tailed. For further details consult *Animal Keepers' Forum*, August 1984, pp. 254-257.

Tame bats can be extremely helpful in dispelling needless fears, but everyone, especially children, should be warned not to handle bats on their own, since any they can catch are more likely than others to be sick.



A Common Long-eared Bat (Plecotus auritus) from Britain. Photo courtesy Merlin D. Tuttle.

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