

For the Love of Bats

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Bert Grantges' room in Arlington, Texas, looks like that of any other typical 14-year-old, but for the sign on the door: "Knock. Bats are in my room." Another sign taped to the refrigerator, "Feed bats!," gives any visitor a further clue that this is not a typical household.

Bert has been interested in bats since he was four when he came across a chapter about bats in the book *Wild Animals of North America*. The text and photographs were by Merlin Tuttle. Bert became so fascinated with bats that he had his father or mother read the chapter to him nearly every night until the book became worn out from use. Bert continued to pore over everything he could find about bats, visiting and revisiting the bat exhibits at local zoos. Today, his personal library contains nearly every book and publication available about bats.

When Bert was ten, his dreams came true. An article about flying foxes by Merlin Tuttle appeared in the *National Geographic*, and Bert discovered that both the author and an organization called Bat Conservation International had just moved to his home state of Texas. His father called BCI. Learning of Bert's keen interest in bats, Merlin was delighted to invite them to visit BCI's offices in Austin.

Just as Bert's life was changed when he first learned about bats, the entire family's life changed with their visit to Austin. Bats are now a family involvement: Bert's father, Don, has served for the past two years on BCI's Board of Trustees, and together with Bert's mother, Carol, they have accompanied Merlin Tuttle as field assistants on many trips. They began with some preliminary training and vaccinations against rabies (something anyone handling wild animals must do). The Grantges family are now experienced hands and have been to Mexico in search of vampires, have gone to Utah to find the rare spotted bat, have checked on endangered gray bats in Tennessee, and have been to the Big Bend area of southwestern Texas several times where they helped net and release 15 species of bats during surveys. Bert most recently participated as a volunteer in the first season of BCI's Sonoran Desert Bat-Cactus Project (see articles beginning page 3).

Bert currently has 16 bats--one twilight bat (*Nycticeius humeralis*), two pallid bats (*Antrozous pallidus*), four Jamaican fruit bats (*Artibeus jamaicensis*) and eight Egyptian fruit bats (*Rousettus aegyptiacus*). "You can get attached to them real easily," Bert says. "They're gentle animals, not anything at all like most people think." Bert's bats are his good will ambassadors when he lectures to local clubs and school classes about the importance of bats.

Some of his bats were brought to him injured. His captive-reared fruit bats were rescued from zoos who no longer needed them and are now kept for BCI's education projects. Bert breeds the fruit bats and supplies them to qualified educators who have proper state and federal permits.

Despite the sign on Bert's door, the bats don't really live in his room. A large walk-in flight cage in the Grantges garage houses his fruit bats and the babies that several of them had this spring. A nearby utility room was appropriated for his insectivorous bats. Unlike in most households, the utility room storage cupboards don't contain laundry soaps, paints, or tools; Bert keeps his twilight bat and two pallids in them, a separate cupboard for each species. The doors are screened, and inside Bert has provided a homey atmosphere.

To feed them, Bert has a standing mail order for 1,000 meal worms that arrive every three weeks. The fruit bats consume a total of about 28 apples, oranges, and bananas in a week, along with heaping servings of cottage cheese, monkey chow, molasses, and Jell-O. How does Bert's mother cope with her son's unusual pets? "I suppose it's not much different than a frog in his pocket," Carol says. "Except they eat more."

Since meeting Merlin Tuttle and becoming a BCI member three years ago, Bert has become well known as a spokesperson for bats. He started by showing BCI's slide/tape program, "Bats: Myth and Reality." He now lectures to large audiences without notes, answering questions with confidence. Bert is so well versed in bats and has perfected his lecturing ability to such a degree that BCI frequently refers requests for lectures in the Dallas area to him. Newspapers have given Bert front-page coverage, and many of the articles have been syndicated nationwide. *Ranger Rick*, the National Wildlife Federation's youth magazine, invited Bert to write an article about bats when he was only 11, and a feature about him in *Boy's Life* will soon appear.

Bert's biggest opportunity to educate people about bats came in March when he was invited to bring several of his bats for an appearance on "The Tonight Show" with Johnny Carson. It came about when one of Bert's school friends put together a petition with the signatures of hundreds of classmates. The petition explained why they thought Bert, one of the nation's youngest bat experts, would make a good guest. It was sent to the show's directors, and to everyone's amazement, an invitation to appear on the show followed. Seen by millions of viewers, his appearance was a great success.

Bert is also contributing to the success of the new wildlife film being made on bats and the work of BCI (see page 15). Using techniques he learned from Merlin Tuttle, he trained two of his pallid bats to come on call so that scenes of these bats catching scorpions could be filmed. No one had ever before successfully trained a pallid bat to perform in front of bright lights. As a result, this behavior, long known, but rarely seen, was documented on film for the first time.

As Merlin discovered when he first met Bert Grantges, Bert is serious about bats and is totally dedicated to educating others about the need to protect them. His ultimate goal is to work for BCI and to be the next generation to continue the crusade.

NOTE: BCI does not encourage the keeping of captive bats except by well-trained persons who have a demonstrated educational purpose. A few bats become available each year through rehabilitators who acquire injured individuals and also through reproductive overflow from breeding colonies in zoos. These are sometimes available to educators who can obtain necessary state and federal permits and document an ability to provide appropriate care.



Bert Grant feeds on of his Egyptian fruit bats a bit of banana (left). PHOTO BY GARY KANADJIAN, DALLAS MORNING NEWS



Bert's first assignment as a field assistant was learning how to carefully remove bats from a mist net (above). Merlin Tuttle show him how. PHOTO BY MERLIN D. TUTTLE

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