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Bats on Parade in Missouri Andrea Hellmann

As twilight was just beginning to tint the horizon, Roxie Campbell led 15 youngsters and their parents to a site that overlooks the Devil's Icebox, a cave that's home to a nursery colony of about 9,000 gray myotis. With oohs and aahs, the delighted visitors watched the fleeting silhouettes of bats flying out of the cave into the darkening Missouri sky.

Campbell, a member of Bat Conservation International since 1988 and a naturalist at Rock Bridge Memorial State Park on the outskirts of Columbia, Missouri, has been hosting bat programs at the local park every summer for 12 years. Two years ago, she got some powerful help.

The nonprofit Friends of Rock Bridge Memorial State Park (FoRB) expanded Campbell's program into a communitywide event aimed at children. Collaborating with Rock Bridge Memorial State Park (Missouri Department of Natural Resources), the Columbia Public Library and Premier Bank, FoRB created Bats on Parade.

"The hope is that people in the community will relate to bats as their mascot – their local park's famous animal," Campbell said, "and that people who are not particularly into the park or caves or bats will still appreciate them in some way."

Informative, age-appropriate and always fun, the project was judged Best Interpretive Effort by a Group last year by The Association of Missouri Interpreters, which cited FoRB's varied and innovative approach to demonstrating the importance of bats in central Missouri's ecosystem.

Bats on Parade features a series of four programs at the park and the community library, as well as a website with links to BCI and other bat information sites. Each program used a different hands-on approach in a different setting to teach children and their families about the complex interrelationships between bats and other organisms within the 2,273-acre state park. Seven bat species inhabit the park, including the endangered gray myotis (*Myotis grisescens*) and Indiana myotis (*Myotis sodalis*).

Through stories, songs and lectures, naturalists and FoRB volunteers explain that bats prey upon flying insects, then leave guano deposits in the caves for other organisms to feed on.


The project began in June, when youngsters cut out and decorated dozens of bat cards that were hung from the ceilings at the library and at Premier Bank. Bat-decorating days were held at a preschool and at the library, as the kids listened to bat stories while coloring and pasting their paper bats.

As 9-year-old Mollie O'Day was busily coloring her bat, her mom, Betsy O'Day, said, "We need to teach [our children] about ecosystems because they need to protect them. Otherwise we'll lose those ecosystems."

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