



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 is resigning as President/Executive Director on May 31. He will remain a 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 has accepted a one-year sabbatical leave, beginning June 1, to pursue personal projects. He will also work on select projects with BCI, including efforts to deal with the crisis triggered by White-nose Syndrome.

Merlin Tuttle "has done more for bat conservation than anyone in history," bat biologist Bill Schutt of Long Island University (author of *Dark Banquet: Blood and the Curious Lives of Blood-feeding Creatures*) said in an email. "That is something that you (and all of us) should be proud of."

"At a time when most bat species were considered to be ugly and vile, Merlin has 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," says Mitchell, "is a pioneer. 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."

Merlin and BCI have had a revolutionary impact on the public's understanding of bats and their benefits in the United States and around the world. That required battling centuries of harmful myths and misperceptions. There remains a long road ahead, but the progress has been dramatic.

Merlin founded BCI in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, when he was Curator of Mammals at the Milwaukee Public Museum. The struggling organization with virtually no money was a nights-and-weekends enterprise. When he moved BCI to Austin, Texas, in 1986, that city was gripped by panic because hundreds of thousands of bats had moved into roosts beneath the remodeled Congress Avenue Bridge downtown. "Mass fear in the air as bats invade Austin," screamed a local newspaper headline. Much of the public 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 1½ million "Bridge Bats" draw many thousands of visitors each year and generate an estimated \$10 million in local revenue. Now Austin proudly calls itself the Bat Capital of America.

Public understanding of bats makes so much else possible. Under Merlin's leadership, BCI, through its Student Research Scholarships, small-grants programs and other efforts has supported hundreds of critical research, conservation and education projects in 76 countries from Argentina and Bangladesh to Uganda and Vietnam. 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 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.

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, millions of Mexican freetail; 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.

Merlin Tuttle has been studying bats since 1959, when, as a Tennessee teenager, he became fascinated by a colony of gray myotis at a cave near his home. While still in high school, he proved for the first time that the bats migrated between summer roosts and winter hibernation caves across much of the South. He also learned firsthand that ignorance about bats can lead to casual vandalism that kills thousands, even tens of thousands, in single incidents. Many people really were convinced back then that all bats were vampires, rabid, blind and quite likely to become tangled in your hair.

That early research grew over the years into Merlin's Ph.D. dissertation in population ecology at the University of Kansas. At his request, the battered populations of gray myotis were officially listed as endangered in 1976. Largely through BCI's efforts, 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 had a leading role in organizing and funding a WNS Science Priority Meeting for top scientists in New York last summer and is working with Tom Kunz of Boston University on a similar session May 27-28 in Austin.)

Merlin's commitment to education has never wavered. He has spoken to countless of audiences of all kinds, has appeared often on television and radio and has been featured frequently in national and international magazines and newspapers. Along the way, he became a world-class wildlife photographer "after concluding that few existing photos presented bats fairly, since the animals, usually grasped in unnatural positions, were snarling in discomfort rather than showing their mostly gentle nature.

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