

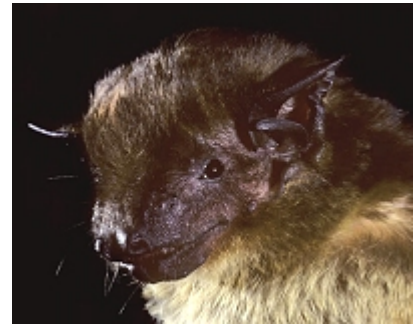
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Bats in the News - Protecting the Bats of Kenya

Among many threats facing bats in Kenya is the common, age-old belief that the flying mammals are tied to witchcraft and evil. But a few dedicated conservationists are working to dispel those damaging myths, reports The Star newspaper of Nairobi, Kenya. The story by reporter Raphael Mwadime provided a lesson in the values of bats and warned that if Africa loses its bats, it could also lose such foods as bananas and avocados.

"I cannot allow bats to stay in my house because they might be evil spirits sent to finish me," 82-year-old Grace Mbori told the newspaper. And Charles Mnda said he had to kill a bat that found its way into his house because "I had to eliminate it before I got to sleep." Bats, Mwadime wrote, "are probably Kenya's most misunderstood and persecuted mammals because they are only active at night."

But, The Star reports, researchers from Moi University, with support from Bat Conservation International (through a Global Grassroots Conservation Fund grant), are conducting an ambitious public-education campaign to protect bats of Kenya's Taita Hills forests, while also assessing the current status of local bat populations.



*African yellow house bat. Photo
© Merlin D. Tuttle, BCI*

Daniel Mwamidi, who is leading the project, told a public forum in the town of Wundanyi that bats play a vital role in enhancing the nation's food security, the newspaper said. Bats are critical pollinators of such important wild crops as bananas, avocados, pigeon peas, strawberries, dates and figs, he told the gathering. Some species help agriculture by eating huge amounts of damaging insects.

But, the newspaper quoted Mwamidi as saying, "Since bats are nocturnal animals, they are associated with various dangers and fears of darkness and accompanying myths in the communities. These fears have adversely affect the population of bats in Taita Hills and frustrate conservation efforts since the locals kill them."

The Star said Mwamidi's bat-awareness project is working with provincial governments, schools and farmers to dispel myths and build support for protecting bats and their habitats. "We use area chiefs in their public meetings to teach the local community on the importance of these animals," he said. "Bats, like other animals, need food, water, roosting and maternity habitats for survival. Any effort to promote these would add to conservation and enhance their survival."

Mwamidi encouraged teachers and schoolchildren to build bat houses near their schools to give bats alternatives to roosting in classrooms. The newspaper said he also advised farmers not to spray pesticides on their crops during the evening to avoid contaminating bats that visit plants at night to eat nectar.

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