

Introduction

Bats are essential to the health of our natural world. They help control pests and are vital pollinators and seed-dispersers for countless plants. Yet these wonderfully diverse and beneficial creatures are among the least studied and most misunderstood of animals.

Centuries of myths and misinformation still generate needless fears and threaten bats and their habitats around the world. Bat populations are declining almost everywhere. Losing bats would have devastating consequences for natural ecosystems and human economies. Knowledge is the key. Bat Conservation International has been combining education, research and conservation to protect bats worldwide since 1982.



The more than 1,200 species of bats – about one-fifth of all mammal species – are incredibly diverse. They range from the world's smallest mammal, the tiny bumblebee bat that weighs less than a penny to giant flying foxes with six-foot wingspans. Except for the most extreme desert and polar regions, bats have lived in almost every habitat on Earth since the age of the dinosaurs.

Bats are primary predators of night-flying insects, including many of the most damaging agricultural pests and others that bedevil the rest of us. More than two-thirds of bat species hunt insects, and they have healthy appetites. A single little brown bat can eat up to 1,000 mosquito-sized insects in a single hour, while a pregnant or lactating female bat typically eats the equivalent of her entire body weight in insects each night.

Almost a third of the world's bats feed on the fruit or nectar of plants. In return for their meals, these bats are vital pollinators of countless plants (many of great economic value) and essential seed dispersers with a major role in regenerating rainforests. About 1 percent of bats eat fish, mice, frogs or other small vertebrates.

Only three species, all in Latin America, are vampires. They really do feed on blood, although they lap it like kittens rather than sucking it up as horror movies suggest. Even the vampires are useful: an enzyme in their saliva is among the most potent blood-clot dissolvers known and is used to treat human stroke victims.