

How the Bats were Saved

Austin reveres its bridge bats. Bats are Austin's official animals. A statue celebrates them. The city calls itself The Bat Capital of America. But it was not always so.

What's now the world's largest urban bat colony once was on the verge of extermination. Austin's bats suffered from the same misperceptions and fears that plague bats around the world.

The story begins in 1980, when the bridge across Town Lake was renovated. Engineers inadvertently created an ideal bat roost by adding a series of long, thin joints – about an inch wide and 17 inches deep – along the underside of the bridge.

By 1984, bats by the hundreds of thousands had discovered the joys of those cozy crevices. The public response was near-panic. "Mass Fear in the Air as Bats Invade Austin," screamed a newspaper headline of the time.

A public-health crisis was declared (needlessly, of course, since not a single case of bat-transmitted disease has been reported in Austin since the bats arrived). Many Austinites wanted the bats gone and eradication seemed imminent.

Then Bat Conservation International came to town...

Bat Conservation International and the Bridge Bats

BCI Founder Merlin Tuttle moved the nonprofit's headquarters from Milwaukee to Austin in 1986, partly to save the besieged bridge bats.

He and his staff immediately launched a vigorous public-education campaign. They met with media, community groups, schoolchildren and city leaders. BCI gradually convinced Austinites that they have little to fear and much to gain from the bats in their midst. Not only do the bridge bats delight tourists, they also help control destructive insects and reduce the need for pesticides.

A little truth goes a long way. Now these once-feared little mammals enjoy a warm welcome when they cruise into Austin each spring. These are fortunate bats, with a whole city looking out for them. Around the world, most bats are at great risk from habitat loss, destruction by humans and now the devastating wildlife disease called White-nose Syndrome.



Bats find snug summer homes in narrow joints beneath Austin's Congress Avenue Bridge.

About the Bats

About 1½ million Mexican free-tailed bats spend their summers under the Congress Avenue Bridge. This is a maternity colony of female bats that give birth and raise their young while snuggled into the bridge's crevices.

Each night, the bridge bats come streaming out to patrol the city in search of flying insects. By morning, they will have eaten about 20,000 pounds of pests. This twilight "emergence," with the urban skyline as a backdrop, is a dramatic sight that draws tens of thousands of visitors each summer.

The bats arrive each spring after spending the winter in Mexico. They return south after the first cold fronts of fall.

A Year in the Life of Austin's Bridge Bats

- January:** Nearly all of Texas' Mexican free-tailed bats are spending the winter in caves of northern Mexico. Free-tails don't hibernate like many other bats, but remain active year-round.
- February:** The bats mostly begin their northward migration. They usually return to their home areas, although they may use various roosts in each area.
- March:** The migration is in full force. Freetails usually travel in groups, cruising as high as 10,000 feet.
- April:** Most freetail settle into their summer roosts, including about 750,000 pregnant females under the Congress Avenue Bridge.
- May:** Mothers-to-be prepare to give birth by feeding heavily each night. The echolocation (biosonar) beeps that bats use for hunting in the dark create quite a din, although it is too high-pitched for humans to hear.
- June:** Baby freetails, each weighing barely a tenth of an ounce, are born in early June as the underside of the bridge becomes a nursery. The bridge-bat population reaches about 1.5 million.
- July:** This is a tough month for night-flying insects. A nursing mother bat can eat almost her weight in insects nightly. The bridge bats eat as much as 140,000 pounds of bugs a week.
- August:** The pups are weaned and learn to fly. They join their mothers on nightly bug-hunts, making for spectacular emergences at the bridge.
- September:** Downtown bat watching is often outstanding, as long as rain and cold fronts stay away.
- October:** The bridge bats usually start migrating southward. Fall migrations, triggered by strong cold fronts, can vary by several weeks from year to year.
- November:** Migration continues and the bats move into the caves of Mexico. With tailwinds, the migrating freetails can hit speeds of 60 mph or more.
- December:** Most Central Texas freetails are roosting in caves south of Texas, and some mating likely begins. Several thousand, however, remain in Texas all winter.

BATS ARE ESSENTIAL TO MAINTAINING HEALTHY ECOSYSTEMS and economies. Yet they are also among the most misunderstood and needlessly feared of the world's creatures. And their populations are declining worldwide.

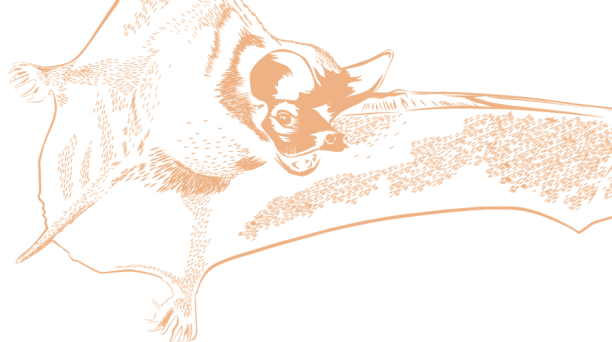
Bat Conservation International is the world leader in defending these beleaguered flying mammals and the habitats they so ably serve. From our headquarters in Austin, we have achieved major conservation successes, dispelling myths and educating the public and decision-makers of many countries about the benefits of bats, and winning protection for key bat populations and habitats.

BCI combines education and outreach with scientific research and direct conservation action to transform attitudes and protect bat populations now and for years to come. We support and nurture future scientists and conservationists and help establish self-sustaining conservation efforts around the world.

Bats desperately need your support. Help us ensure that bats will still be there to keep our natural world healthy for our children and grandchildren.

Join Bat Conservation International today.
www.batcon.org/joinbci

A major benefit of joining BCI is the rare opportunity to see the world's largest bat colony – as many as 20 million Mexican free-tailed bats that summer at Bracken Bat Cave near San Antonio. Watching this immense community of bats emerge from the cave is an unforgettable experience. BCI owns and protects this remarkable natural resource and must limit visitation to ensure its conservation.



Why You Should Care

Bats are at risk around the world. More than half of the 46 species of U.S. bats are either officially endangered or face declining populations.

Bats are among the most beneficial of animals. They fill vital roles in maintaining healthy ecosystems, and their presence pays cash dividends to humans in many ways.

Bats are primary predators of night-flying insects. They consume enormous quantities of bugs, including moths and beetles that cost farmers and foresters billions of dollars a year. The millions of free-tailed bats in Central Texas' Bracken Cave consume up to 200 tons of insects each summer night. Without bats, pesticide use inevitably would increase.



Millions of bats leave Bracken Cave each night to hunt insects.

Throughout the tropics, fruit- and nectar-eating bats are essential pollinators and seed dispersers for countless plants. Seeds spread by bats can account for up to 95 percent of early regeneration on cleared stretches of rainforest.

Wild varieties of many of our most valuable crops rely on bats for their survival. These include bananas, breadfruit, avocados, dates, figs, peaches, mangoes and many others. In the American Southwest, the saguaro and organ pipe cacti and agave are pollinated by bats.

But bats increasingly are losing their habitats to expanding human populations. Their roosts are disrupted by miners and tourists. They are hunted for food or simply slaughtered because of unnecessary fears. Now U.S. and Canadian bats face the scourge of White-nose Syndrome, a disease that has killed more than a million bats in four years and is still spreading rapidly. Bat Conservation International is working worldwide to conserve bats and their habitats.

Our planet would be much poorer – environmentally and economically – without bats.

Learn more at www.batcon.org.

Fun Facts About Freetails

- With tailwinds, Mexican free-tailed bats have been clocked flying at speeds up to 60 miles per hour.
- Freetails can reach altitudes of up to 10,000 feet as they pursue migrating corn earworm moths.
- Freetail droppings (guano) were once commonly used to make gunpowder and are still widely used as fertilizer.
- Freetails may cover 50 miles or more one-way to find food each night .
- As many as 20 million freetail tails spend their summers at San Antonio's Bracken Bat Cave, home of the largest bat colony in the world.
- Freetails, like all bats, are not blind. They do, however, use echolocation (a biological sonar system) to hunt flying prey in total darkness.
- Freetail migrations can cover 1,000 miles.
- Mexican free-tailed bats are found across most of the southern half of the United States, south through Mexico and Central America and deep into South America.

Mexican free-tailed bats are voracious insect-eaters. The bridge bats eat up to 20,000 pounds of bugs each night



Never Handle a Bat

Do not touch a bat or any wild animal!

The vast majority of bats do not have rabies, but a bat on the ground or one that can be approached by humans is likely to be sick or injured. No one has ever gotten rabies from bats at the Congress Avenue Bridge. But don't take any chances. Remember the rule: Don't ever touch a bat!

(If you see a bat on the ground, tell people to stay away from it. If a person or pet has direct contact with a bat, call Animal Control at 311.)