

Bats: Love 'em or fear 'em, we need 'em

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When you get right down to it, I'm very bat-like.

I sleep all day and play all night. I prefer dark places and I will absolutely ruin your barbecue.

No truth to the rumor that I'll get stuck in your hair, though. It's been tested and proven false.

I'm a fan of bats and there aren't many of those. I've always wondered why.

"They are not attractive – I went to find a picture of a baby bat and they are even worse: Pink, naked and ugly! They have little eyes, they move so fast that you never really get a handle on their anatomy."

That, my friends, is from Susan Gallo of Maine Audubon and she is a friend to bats. As icky as she finds them, Gallo is wise enough to know that we need bats and that in their way, the creatures improve our lives.

"They are phenomenal at insect control," she says. "Three thousand bugs a night is one estimate for one little brown bat, our most common species."

Think about that the next time you're trying to entertain a yard full of guests who are slapping themselves silly because the mosquitoes are out in force. If not for bats, you probably wouldn't be able to go outside at all.

And think about this:

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimated in January that between 6 and 7 million bats have died as a result of “white nose syndrome,” a mysterious white fungus that appears around their muzzle that has wiped out entire hibernating colonies. In Maine, bat populations dropped by more than 90 percent in just one year at two of three known hibernating colonies.

Fewer bats, more bugs.

And since you care, scientists are using volunteers to help them conduct the first-ever formal surveys of bat populations in Maine to find out how successful mother bats (there’s a mental image for you) are at raising offspring and to determine if the decline is continuing.

Maine Audubon, for its part, has already asked its members to help in the two-year study, and it is also asking others to get involved.

I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking they want you to climb into a cave and hand count all those screeching bats with their little black eyes and dagger-like fangs. But no.

“At this point, we’d like to hear from people who had or have bat colonies on their property, and let us know if those are simply active or inactive this year. . . . Just finding out where they are (and hearing if they are empty this summer) is going to provide us good information,” says Gallo. (See the information box for details on how to contact Audubon, as well as to learn why — if you have bats in your garage or attic — you should leave them alone until late summer.)

‘Puppies with wings’

Meanwhile, there’s the lingering animosity and misinformation about bats. They are avatars of all the unknown things that slither and creep in the night. (See the first-hand stories from readers if you disagree.) Instead of thinking of them as hardworking insect control agents, we link them with Dracula.

“People associate them with horror movies,” says Jen Lewis, who very likely understands the winged-creatures more than anyone in the state. “They see them as flying rodents. They call them rats with wings. But they’re not. They’re very passive, more like puppies; they’re like puppies with wings.”

You heard her correctly. Puppies with wings. (Maybe that’s why baby bats are called “pups.” No lie.) And Lewis would know. The operator of Misfits Rehab in Auburn, she has been taking in bats since 2002 after studying with Bat World Sanctuary in Texas. She even went through something called Bat Boot Camp with that group, living with bats from dawn to dusk for a week to learn their behaviors.

Lewis has come to understand bats, but more than that, she also likes and trusts them. How much? Word on the street is that she's been known to carry bats around in her bra.

"Oh, yeah. I've done that," Lewis says. "Working one-on-one with them, you really see their personalities. Each bat is an individual. No two are alike."

White nose syndrome is taking a huge toll on the bat population, but it's not just that, Lewis says. The misconceptions are killing them, too. People tend to believe that large numbers of bats are crawling with rabies when, in fact, a very small percentage of the bat population is infected.

"One of the saddest things is that whole fear factor," Lewis says. "The thinking is, if there is a bat in your house, kill it."

And what about those bats in your house? It happens in the summer and it invariably causes mayhem. People will go at the creatures with tennis rackets or baseball bats, when simply opening a window will probably do the trick. Bats really aren't interested in hanging out with you, charming as you may be. They'd rather be outside where the action is.

"They're not trying to be in your house. They don't want to live in your habitat," Lewis says. "If you have a bat flying around your house, it's probably a juvenile who took a wrong turn."

Crazy kids.

Maine Animal Damage Control owner Rich Burton of Lewiston is concerned about the declining bat population, as well. As he does with all animals, Burton prefers rescue over elimination. When he gets a call from a shrieking homeowner terrified about Count Batula flying through the house, Burton will capture the bat and bring it to Lewis if it is injured.

Ultimately, the bat is returned to the wild where it continues the work of keeping the bugs off you. And it won't get caught in your hair while its at work, either.

"Another old wives' tale," says Lewis.

Back in the day, woman used a lot of product to keep their exotic hairdos in place. That product attracted insects, which in turn attracted bats. But the bats were after the bugs, not Aunt Helga's quaff. As tenacious as that myth has been, you'll have to search a long time to find a person who has actually had a bat caught in her hair.

Summer of the Bat (according to me)

I'm going to go ahead and deem this season the Summer of the Bat. They do a lot for us and now they're in trouble. We need to step up and help them out. The beautiful thing is, you don't have to actively like the creatures or carry them around in your bra to do your part. All

that is required is a healthy respect for the animals and an understanding of what they're really about.

"I'm a biologist," says Gallo, "so I am intrigued with all their physical traits: the way their hands have evolved to become part of their wing (the skin connects their fingers, and their wrist acts more like a second elbow); their use of sonar to find food; their strategy for getting through the winter. They are just so unusual and we know so little about them."

Summer of the Bat, baby. Think about them the next time you're at the campground and the mosquitoes are swarming around your head with their blood-sucking proboscises probing for a vein. Keep wishing the bats away and you'll have to get used to the itchy discomfort of summertime pestilence.

As Lewis puts it: "It's a matter of being careful what you wish for."

People with information on bat colonies near them can contact Susan Gallo at Maine Audubon either by email (sgallo@maineaudubon.org) or by phone at 207-781-6180 ext. 216.

More information is also posted on Maine Audubon's website at maineaudubon.org/bats.

Also, Gallo is pulling together resources to help people who want to get bats out of their homes. Go to maineaudubon.org/bats. However, "if people want to get bats out of their non-living spaces like attics/garages/etc., they should wait until late summer – the end of July or early August – to do so, as they are all having their babies now and those babies won't be gone until August. If there's any way we can convince people to put up replacement bat roost boxes, that would be a bonus."

Pet or pariah? Your bat stories

We polled our readers on their feelings about bats. Within minutes, we had dozens of responses, the main reaction being some variation of "Eek!" However, if you read carefully, you'll find the odd two or three people who have no problem with the creatures and who have even come to welcome them as our nightly neighbors.

But mostly "Eek!"

Melanie Stinson Newton-Burgess, Wales Corner

When I was a teenager I was babysitting and when I went to check on the crying child I found a bat flying around his room. I grabbed him and ran. My brother came to my rescue with a broom and killed the bat.

Christine Crockett, formerly of Auburn

Actually, when the art school was on the top floor of the Bates Mill complex, some friends and I had a run-in with one. It kept dive-bombing us. I don't think it was the same bat, but a few days later my ex found a dead bat on the floor next to the school, and took it home and

kept it in the freezer until he was ready to take it out and use it for a photo project. Note: The stupid bat was in our freezer for probably four months.

Dana Fields, Lewiston

Funny . . . the night I got asked to leave by my ex, it was late so she let me stay one more night. . . . A bat came in and she flipped out, begging me to help. I wanted to say no because she was kicking me out . . . and also because I was scared poopless, but I tried like hell to catch it. I called the cops and they couldn't help, so I swung at it a billion times with a broom. I hit it only once and it fell to the ground and was moving. I grabbed a box of books I had packed and dropped it on the bat. True story . . . happened on Highland Avenue in Auburn about four years ago.

Jim Gahagan, Lewiston

I used to be a lead for a company that was in the Continental building back in the '80s and '90s and was on the list for calls from ADT on alarms. When the bats in the mill triggered the motion detectors they called me in. Cops would be waiting outside. When we got in we'd locate the trigger point, walk over to that part of the building, look around (looking for a burglar or bats) and usually see him (the bat) flying back and forth. When the cops would realize it was bats and not burglars they would take off, leaving me with a broom to take him out or get him out the window. Then I'd go home and back to bed. Paid for three hours. 😊

Lisa Muzeroll, Waterville

High school boyfriends house. Heard the squeaking first, then saw the little black bat flying erratically around the livingroom. Managed to pin it between a tennis racquet and the floor, slide an album cover under it and release it into the wild.

Sheila Cosgrove Rousseau, Auburn

I could write a book. My house used to be a bat haven. I've had a few fly right at me. There was one that must have been the granddaddy of them all. He must have had a two-foot wing span. Totally gross. We had one one summer that (husband) Roch insisted was hiding in our closet. He emptied the whole thing, left everything on our bed and left to go to a meeting. Later that night, (daughter) Hailey saw it flying in the hallway, but didn't want to wake her dad up to tell him. It flew into our bedroom after I had gone to bed. I hid under the covers while Roch chased it around with a broom. He got it. Then there was the time there was one in the basement. Let me know if you want to hear that one. Hysterical.

Debbie Barker Reed, South Paris

My 5-year-old daughter came into my room after I had put her to bed twice already and said there was a bird in her room. Thinking it was a moth, I told her to go back to bed. She came in 15 minutes later and said, "How do you 'spect me to sleep with a BIRD FLYING AROUND IN MY ROOM?" I took her back to her room, and as I turned the corner saw the largest bat I had ever seen flying circles in her room. I replied, "It's OK honey you can sleep in momma's room." Her dad, a former cop, put on his winter coat and gloves and motorcycle helmet and swung furiously (missing every time) at the creature. I finally grabbed a broom, knocked it to the ground and covered it with a towel.

Pat Malcolm, Lewiston

Gosh, we get so excited. (Instead), get everyone out of the room, open a window and close the door as you leave. The bat doesn't want to be there any more than you want it to be! Next day, find out how it got in and plug the hole. (This after I discovered my teenage daughter hysterical, with her pajama bottoms on her head, swinging away with a broom!)

Carey S. Clark, Arrowsic

We had just moved to Maine and, lo and behold, we found a bat flying through our new rental home at night. The first night, I locked myself and the girls in a bedroom and opened a door, hoping it would fly out. We looked all over for it during the day and did not find it roosting anywhere. The next night it was back out, flew right over my head. This time it did fly out the door when I opened it. . . . I called the CDC the next day and they calmed me down, stating that I likely had not been exposed, and then they welcomed me to Maine.

Brian Peppe, Auburn

I've had my share of dive bombs and having to catch them in a pillow case and throw them outside. But the worst was when I opened a shed door and the thing launched itself right into the middle of my chest — flapping away like it was trying to drill through me. Worst ever. Thing must have had a 14-foot wing span (OK, maybe eight inches, but still . . .). I thought my heart would never slow back down. I still won't open a shed door standing in front of it.

Tricia Pessant Bell, Auburn

Caught it with a net and set it free.

Dave Marquis, Lewiston

I was doing siding job in Kennebunk a few years ago. I got up high on a ladder to set a staging post and noticed a sizable hole in the soffit (the underside of an overhang). I brought up the staging and began cutting out the rotted wood when I notice a horrible ammonia smell. They did not like the noise much. Three of them came out. They flew around me very quickly but never touched me. I almost fell off the staging trying to get away from them and down the ladder. The damn things might as well have been pterodactyls because I wanted no part of them either. When I got to the ground everyone was looking at me like I had two heads (apparently I scream like a little girl when I am scared — who knew, right). I looked at the homeowner and said, "Umm, bats can be beneficial creatures to have around, but not in your home. Know a good exterminator"? I focused on the lower parts of the house for a couple days and once they had been removed, I covered the hole with metal (a common practice) and finished the job. It's a smell you never forget.

Heather Lynn Vallone, Pittsburgh, Penn.

Don't ever reach down into a laundry hamper for what you THINK is a black bra, is all I'm saying.

Thomas Ruyle, formerly of Auburn

Building we lived in in Iraq had about 3,000 bats in the attic. Watching them leave at sunset was one of the coolest things I've ever seen.

Karla Good, Lewiston Middle School teacher

A few years ago at Squapan Lake: In the morning we noticed a bat hanging from a beach towel on the clothesline. We assumed it was sick — in NO way was I going to touch the critter. I figured I'd let nature take its course. We checked on it periodically as he continued to hang out on the towel. About an hour later, it flew over my head, landed in the lake and began an awkward swim to shore 10 feet away. Meanwhile, a huge bull frog sat watching the pathetic creature. Like something you only see on Animal Planet, the frog leaped forward, opened his cavernous mouth and snapped it shut, swallowing the bat whole.

Greg Barker, Lewiston

Actually, we have a bunch that live around our house, so I have close encounters all the time in the evening. They're pretty cool to watch

Sharon Blair, Turner

I was visiting a friend's new apartment out in Greene when a bat started flying around. She grabbed a tennis racket and I grabbed a roll of paper towels. . . . We did catch it in a rug and released it, but it was hilarious chasing it with our choice weapons.

Ernie Edwards Jr., Lewiston

I remember one coming into our house on Bartlett street in 1994. Police came and they knock it out with the flashlight.

Ronda Carbonneau, Lewiston

I was a case-packer at Clark International years ago. I bat started dive-bombing my hair. I played "duck and cover" with it while I screamed for help. Two of the male workers came running. One threw a barrel at the bat and squished it. I was some relieved!

Bobbie Roberts, Ordway, Colorado

Hubby caught a bat at work that was freaking out the other people. He brought it home in a box and put it in our closet for the day. Later that night we took it out to the river bank and let it go.

Michael Pratt, Farmington

Love bats. Would keep one as a pet if I could.

Vicky Pratt, Michael's missus

Absolutely ADORE bats! They're so cute!

