

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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Bats in the Northwest

By Gloria Williams
For 8/31/07 SVH

HEAD:

Bats in the Northwest

DEK:

This horror-story staple is everything but scary

BODY:

How do you feel about bats?

If you fear the fuzzy little creatures and cover your head and run when one appears, you need to know a few facts about bats, which have been unfairly maligned over the years.

The horror stories and old wives tales about bats are not true! They are not blind. They are not rodents. They rarely carry rabies and they never get tangled in women's hair. The reality is that bats benefit humans both ecologically and economically. For starters, they eat copious quantities of insects: One bat can consume from 600 to 1,000 mosquitoes in one hour! All bats you see dipping and swooping at dusk here in the Pacific Northwest are insect-eaters; they're simply out getting dinner.

Bats are furred, warm-blooded mammals that nurse their young. They are not flying mice; they have their own order, *Chiroptera*, which means "winged hand." They live in colonies—preferably in caves, abandoned mines, cliffs, rock crevices, wood piles, under loose tree bark and in tree hollows, or under bridges and in barns. They hibernate in the winter and establish nursery colonies in the spring to rear their young.

Drastic reductions in bat populations have occurred in recent years. The most significant threat to their survival is human disturbance. Habitat destruction; direct killing because of fear, superstition or good-old-fashioned ignorance; chemical toxicants; and disruption of hibernating or maternity colonies are some of the ways we humans affect bat populations. Bats are most vulnerable during periods of hibernation. They must bring themselves out of a hibernating state to face the threat, which uses vital energy they need to live through the winter.

The Washington State Department of Wildlife lists nine native bat species as "Species of Special Concern" that may be considered for the endangered species list. Western Washington species listed are Keen's Myotis, Long-eared Myotis, Long-legged Myotis, Small-footed Myotis, and the Townsend's Big-eared Bat.

These local species are indicative of an international threat; bat populations all over the world are in trouble. Even those that have adapted to environment changes caused by humans are losing their roosts. They moved into our homes as their old-growth forest habitats were cut, and are now finding those homes are becoming more energy-efficient and bat-proof.

If you want to help bats regain their place in our ecosystems, there are several things you can do to ensure their continued presence on this planet.

- Provide habitat when possible. Leave hollow trees and snags standing. Place black-painted bat houses in sunny locations 12 to 18 feet off the ground, and make sure their entrances are unobstructed.
- Support research by universities, government agencies and conservation organizations, such as Bats Northwest or Happy Valley Bats, a bat World Rescue Center north of Seattle.
- Educate yourself so that you can educate others.
- Minimize your use of pesticides.
- Garden with bats in mind. Water features; scented, night-blooming flowers; and mercury vapor lights all attract night-flying insects, which in turn attract bats to feast.

If you already have a bat colony living near you, do your part by allowing them the solitude they require. They will reward you by eating the mosquitoes that plague backyard outings in the summer. They will move on when the fall arrives and cold weather drives them into hibernation. If you want to learn more, go online to www.batcom.org, or www.batsnorthwest.org, and www.happyvalleybats.org.

PHOTO CAPTIONS:

[Bat house photo and caption to come from Jason Miller]



Resources:

- www.batcom.org
- www.batsnorthwest.org
- www.happyvalleybats.org

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.