

# Bats in the Northwest

By Gloria Williams and Corrina Marote

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## 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 (see sidebar) 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.

## BATS WORKSHOP

- **What:** "Living with Bats" — a free WSU Know & Grow workshop, will reveal bat mysteries, debunk bat myths, and demonstrate how bats play an integral part in our environment, helping humans directly in myriad ways. Presented by WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners, in partnership with the WSU – Mount Vernon Northwestern Washington Research and Extension Center.
- **When:** 1:00 to 2:30 p.m. Tuesday, November 18
- **Where:** WSU – Mount Vernon Northwestern Washington Research and Extension Center, 16650 Highway 536 (Memorial Highway), west of Mount Vernon
- **Speaker:** Kathleen Bander of Bats Northwest
- **Learn more:** To suggest an idea or topic for a future WSU Know & Grow workshop, call 360-428-4270.

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](http://www.batcom.org), or [www.batsnorthwest.org](http://www.batsnorthwest.org), and [www.happyvalleybats.org](http://www.happyvalleybats.org).

## **BATS AND RABIES – WHAT’S YOUR RISK?**

Bats are increasingly active in the summer and fall. Some members of our community may find them in their homes. Others may encounter them roosting under patio umbrellas, eaves, or may install bat houses. In general, bats prefer solitude and handling should be avoided. Bats are an important component of the ecosystem since they eat so many insects and pollinate some plants; however, they are the only reservoir for rabies in Washington.

Rabies is a viral disease that is transmitted from infected mammals to humans. People can get rabies if they are exposed to the saliva or nervous tissue of a rabid animal. According to Washington State Department of Health (DOH), 5–10 percent of bats tested are found to carry the rabies virus. Though rabies exposure is rare, it is nearly 100 percent fatal.

Since bats are important ecologically, education about their biology, as well as the necessity of vaccinating pets that may be exposed to bats, is critical for controlling the spread of the virus. Often people do not know what to do if a bat is found in the house, particularly in the sleeping area of a child or elderly person. Rabies has infected individuals who were unaware of being bitten. Awareness of the precautions, then taking appropriate steps, are important parts of preventing this fatal disease.

Rabies exposure is easily preventable if you know how to respond to a bat encounter. Information on the risk of rabies, how to safely capture a bat, bats as rabies vectors and their importance ecologically, and how to bat-proof the home is available here at the Health Department or through Centers for Disease Control and DOH Web sites (<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/kidsrabies/> and <http://www.doh.wa.gov/EHSPHL/factsheet/rabiesfct.htm>).

Washington does not have a high incidence of rabies. However, this disease is nearly always fatal and is preventable. Install bat houses, but keep them a reasonable distance away from your residence. If you find a bat in your house, please contact the Skagit County Public Health Department (360) 336-9380.

—Corrina Marote