

IDENTITY CONFIRMED: THIS *MYOTIS LUCIFUGUS* (LITTLE BROWN BAT) SHOULD GIVE BIRTH TO HER PUP IN A COUPLE OF WEEKS

PULSE



GOING TO BAT FOR BATS

Forget Count Dracula, these night-flying bug eaters are the good guys

As biologist Aaron Reid dons a head-mount flashlight and ascends into the attic, Jeff Bedard and Liz Gosselin wonder if his presence might disturb their upstairs tenants. Reid, who assures them he won't be long, is not surprised to find the inhabitants clinging to the warmth of the chimney. Gently, he collects one specimen into a small cloth bag and takes it to the picnic table for identification.

are to help people identify roosts on their property and relocate them if necessary, and to gather information. Of BC's 16 bat species, 14 live in our area, yet we know surprisingly little about them—and much of what we think we know is myth.

Bats are not rodents; they are more closely related to primates. Nor are they blind. They rely on echolocation to track their prey, but depend on their vision for longer distances. The risk of rabies is real, but often overstated, since most bats tested were found lolling about in broad daylight—not typical

“...if every farmer had bat houses, we wouldn't need pesticides...”

Reid volunteers with the South Okanagan Similkameen Community Bat Project (www.bcbats.ca), which is funded by the Habitat Conservation Trust Fund and Bat Conservation International. Its goals

behaviour for a healthy bat. (Reid says anyone who may have had contact with a bat should get post-exposure treatment, which is no worse than any other vaccination.)

All of BC's bats dine on pesky



PULSE from page 17...

insects, including mosquitoes and crop-vandalizing leafhoppers, beetles, midges and moths. Each furry little critter can consume hundreds of insects per hour. “If I had my way, every farmer would have 20 or 30 bat houses,” says Reid. “Then we wouldn't have to use pesticides.”

Most local bat species roost in crevices, under the loose bark and in the hollows of large trees, and in buildings. Typically, these are females who gather together in maternity colonies, each giving birth to a single pup. Although a bat can easily live for 20 years (and can reach 40), the colony tends to stay the same size because few pups survive winter.

Bats won't damage structures, but they can be messy. Reid suggests placing a tarp around the chimney to collect droppings, which fetch a hefty price as organic compost. If bats must be excluded from a building, he advises that you wait until they leave in the fall, then seal them out—but be sure to provide an optional residence. Otherwise, as Gosselin says, “it's like kicking someone out of their home and saying, ‘Go live on the street.’”

Gosselin and Bedard are renting, so they're not sure their bats will always be welcome. When a house painter discovered a roost behind their old brown shutters (Gosselin says he nearly fell off the ladder), Bedard converted the shutters into a bat house and mounted it on the garage.

“That's the coolest looking bat house I've ever seen,” says Reid, who recommends moving it to the south wall of the building: females need plenty of steady heat to shorten the gestation period.

As he prepares to return the little creature to the attic, I suggest this couple might consider themselves bat heroes. “I wouldn't call us heroes,” says Bedard. “I'd just call it common sense.” —Dawn Renaud