

Bats help Battle Crop Pests

Bats have a bad reputation. But no matter what you have heard about bats, here are some realities. Bats are critical in the balance of nature; they are essential to the ecosystem. These crop and farm-friendly creatures consume enormous amounts of insects daily. They eat the beetles, moths, and leafhoppers that cost landowners billions of dollars in damages each year. In addition, as pollinators, many of the smaller species of bats play an important role. Some tropical plants are dependent on bats not only for pollination but for the spread of seeds from the fruit they eat.

What distinguishes bats from other mammals are their forelimbs, which developed as wings. This unique feature makes them the only mammal in the world that is naturally capable of flight. While some mammals may glide through the air, bats are the only mammals that can truly fly.

Bats account for approximately 20 percent of all mammals. Most bats feed on insects, while others feed on fruits. In contrast to the horror movies we have all seen, only three species actually feed on blood – actually their prey consists of vertebrates and fish. Two species of bats do feed on other bats. So you see the myth that bats will suck your blood, is completely false.

Bats are a tremendous asset to the agricultural industry. The benefits of bats to land owners goes on and on. A few examples are:

- 1) Just 150 big brown bats can eat enough cucumber beetles each summer to protect agricultural producers from 33 million of the rootworm larvae. This pest costs American producer an estimated billion dollars a year.
- 2) Bats eat millions of pounds nightly of insects, including many costly pests.
- 3). Some land owners have installed bat houses-minimizing their crop losses by as much as 30%.
- 4) A little brown bat can eat 1200 insects in an hour.

Fact vs. myth on bats

Misconceptions abound on bats. For instance, they are not blind, they do not become entangled in human hair and they seldom transmit disease to other animals or humans.

Some bats can maneuver like helicopters to pluck insects from foliage, while others fly 10,000 feet high and dive like jets.

Like most animals, bats suffer from habitat loss. Their primary cause of decline is destruction of natural roosts by humans.

Landowners can help by building and putting up bat houses on their property, or working with highway departments to create roosts under bridges. The Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) is helping to ensure mines that are closed can continue to provide habitat and openings for bats.

Information on bats, including how to build a bat house, how to benefit by attracting bats to bridges, and how to protect bats in caves, is available from Bat Conservation International on the web.

For more information, stop at our office at 4505 George Blvd. in Sebring or visit the NRCS Wildlife Habitat Management Institute's website at www.whmi.nrcs.usda.gov or the NRCS home web site at www.nrcs.usda.gov or go to <http://www.highlandsswcd.org/> for additional information.

Did you know: Not only do bats see as well as other animals, they use "echolocation" to detect objects as fine as a human hair in total darkness.