MORE BAT MYTHS THAT JUST CAN'T HANG

Setting the story straight about the world's only flying mammals.

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A BAT-EARED FOX (OTOCYON MEGALOTIS) STANDS ALERT, WITH ITS LARGE EARS AND DARK FUR, WHICH HELP REGULATE BODY TEMPERATURE IN A WIDE VARIETY OF LOCATIONS THAT PROVIDE SHELTER FROM THE ELEMENTS AND PREDATORS. INCLUDING HOLLOW TREE TRUNKS. PHOTO © WWF-MALAYSIA / KOH NATIONAL NEWSEN

By Jordan Bowman

Last year we tackled some of the most common bat myths that have flown around world. But since centuries of folklore surrounding bats are laced with questionable information, it's time for use to set the story straight about the world's only flying mammals.

Myth: Bats always sleep in caves.

FALSE

Blame this one on Batman if you must. It's true that many species of bats flock to caves to sleep or hibernate thanks to their steady temperatures and humidity levels – such as the famous Mexican free-tailed bats (*Tadarida brasiliensis*) in Bracken Cave, Texas. However, bats can commonly be found roosting in many locations that provide shelter from the elements and predators, including including under tree bark, in hollow tree trunks, between tree leaves, hanging in the rafters of barns or sheds, under bridges, in rock crevices, or even nestled in curled up tropical plant leaves.

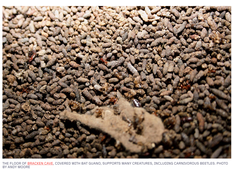
A SLOW-MOTION LOOK AT SUPERHERO-A GROOMING ROUTINE BEFORE FLIGHT! VIDEO BY JASON HEADLEY/ © ALBERTA BAT CONSERVATION BAT PROGRAM

Myth: Bats are dirty and can transmit diseases to humans.

NEEDS CONTEXT

We've already busted the myth about all bats carrying rabies, but what about other diseases? Like any wild animal, bats can carry a variety of bacteria and viruses that are transmissible to humans – as such, you should never touch or handle a bat, and see a doctor immediately if you are bitten or scratched by one. This pretty much goes for any wild animal.

That being said, calling a bat dirty is a stretch: like house cats, bats spend a lot of their day grooming themselves and each other, which keeps their fur sleek and helps remove any parasites.



THE FLUTE OF BRUCE'S CAVE, COVERED WITH BAT GUANO. EUPHOTE'S MANY CREATURES, INCLUDING CARNIVOROUS BEETLES. PHOTO BY ANDY WEDNE

Myth: Guano is poisonous to humans.

FALSE (BUT DON'T TOUCH IT! ⚠)

Bat poop, or guano, is not directly harmful to humans – in fact, it is a commonly-used fertilizer rich with the nitrogen, potassium, and phosphate plants crave. But think twice before collecting guano in the wild for your garden or house plants – bat and bird poop (also called guano) can contain pathogens, including the dangerous microscopic fungus that causes histoplasmosis, whose spores can be inhaled if you get close. If you want to purchase guano for your garden, make sure it is organic-certified (look for OMRI and NOP labels). This will ensure that the guano has been processed for safety according to USDA regulations.

A GROUP OF SERBA'S WHITE-FACED BATS (*CAMILLA PERSPICILLATA*) ROOSTING IN BARN RAFTERS, BRAZIL. PHOTO BY SUZI ESZTERHAS, MINDEN PICTURES

Myth: You have to kill any bats that get in your house/attic to prevent them from coming back.

FALSE (BIG TIME)

Once bats have found a safe location to roost, they tend to return time and again (just like you return to your own every day). But don't kill bats that have settled in one of your buildings! Bats can be safely removed and relocated by trained bat rehabilitators/rescuers – check out Bat World Sanctuary's list of local rescues in your state, or contact your state wildlife agency or Department of Natural Resources.

A BRAZILIAN FREE-TAILED BAT (*TADARIDA BRASILIENSIS*) FLIES THROUGH THE DARK. DESPITE THEIR CUTENESS, BATS ARE NO LARGE THAT HAD CAN EFFECT ON WEATHER RADARS WHEN THEY TAKE FLIGHT. PHOTO BY JONATHAN KLINGEL

Myth: Some bat colonies are so large that they can be seen on weather radars

TRUE

Think that's a rainstorm headed your way? Think again: some bat colonies are so large that they can appear on weather radars when they take flight. In fact, scientists can use weather radars to study wildlife migration. As radar technology advances, scientists are exploring how to use the details in radar signals to identify different types of bats and birds based on patterns in their flight behavior.

BRAZILIAN FREE-TAILED BATS (*TADARIDA BRASILIENSIS*) FLY OUT OF THE BRACKEN CAVE PRESERVE IN TEXAS, WHICH IS HOME TO THE LARGEST KNOWN COLONY OF BATS IN THE WORLD. PHOTO BY MERLIN D. TUTTLE, BAT CONSERVATION INTERNATIONAL

Myth: Many people fear bats for a good reason: they do more harm than good.

ABSOLUTELY FALSE

We get it: not everyone thinks bats are cute like we do. But to say bats are a net negative for the world could not be more wrong. Bats are one of the world's most important forms of pest control, consuming a substantial number of crop-destroying insects each year. They are pollinators for a wide variety of plants (including agave), from huge trees to tiny fruits and spices. And they help disperse seeds that help maintain and regrow healthy ecosystems around the world. In short: the world would be a lesser place without bats, so it is vital for us all to ensure they continue to fill the night skies for generations to come.

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Based in the New Jersey highlands, Jordan Bowman writes about environmental conservation and ways to better connect with the great outdoors.

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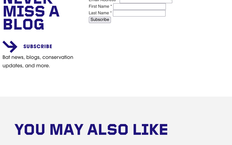

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