

Handling Household Pests: Our Leather-Winged Friend, the Bat

Behind Door Number One

It was a warm August evening and we had just returned home from a weekend in the city. The hour was late, the air was dense and we were weary from hours on the road. All I wanted to do was unload the car and crawl to bed.

As I walked across the kitchen, I heard an odd noise, like little teeny fingernails on a little teeny blackboard. I glanced around, saw nothing and took another step. There it was again. I looked up at the ceiling fan to see if the pull chain was rattling against the light kit. Again, there was nothing.

Dismissing the noise as a cricket or “something outside,” I picked up one of the empty pieces of luggage and opened the door to the attic stairs. There it was, on the floor below the bottom step. At first I thought it was a toad. Then it moved its wings. I screamed. It screamed back. I slammed the door.

At this point my twin sons came running into the kitchen. “What are you screaming at, Dad?” Not mentioning the bat, I sternly ordered them to the front of the house and told them to stay there until I called. Armed with an empty flowerpot, I took a breath, crept back across the room and cautiously opened the door again. My little friend was still there, on the floor, looking up at me with beady eyes, baring his fangs, flapping furiously and squealing. I fought back the urge to close the door again (and put the house on the market) and instead covered the furry intruder with the pot. A few minutes later I released him into the clear night sky, watched him flutter off into the darkness then poured myself a measure of a certain beverage distilled in Lynchburg.

Not In My Attic, Buster

My next door neighbor proved to be an invaluable resource when it came to *Myotis lucifugus*, more commonly known as the Little Brown Bat. His family had lived in the neighborhood for decades, and had dealt with their share of unwanted night fliers in the house. “You’ve got to think like a mouse, only everything is upside down.” I had no idea what he meant by this, but I did take the name and phone number of an animal control specialist he referred to as “the bat man.” The following weekend, our house was inspected, a “bat funnel” and several cans of insulating foam spray were purchased, and we knew more than we’d ever hoped to know about bats.

Bats have been slandered, feared and mistreated by humankind for centuries. Although I happened to do the right thing on our first encounter by capturing the bat and releasing him outdoors, this was more from a lack of acceptable alternatives than anything else. I was terrified that he would gain flight if I didn’t quickly cover him with something, and I knew that the presence of a bat (or parts thereof) dead or alive in my wife’s kitchen would have met with her disapproval when she got home from the Dachshund sitter’s. In fact, her initial shame and disgust at having had a bat in our home was only abated after weeks of research and therapy.

We were typical in our reaction to the bat, fearing that it would get stuck in someone's hair, or attack us a la Christopher Lee. We suddenly pictured our house as the oldest, ugliest structure in town, full of cobwebs and creaky doors, something menacing around every dark hallway or corner. The shame!

As it turns out, bats are incredibly beneficial creatures, deserving of our gratitude and respect. According to our state department of conservation a single bat may consume 3,000 insects in one night including corn borer and cutworm moths, as well as mosquitoes. This particular culinary preference makes the bat our partner in controlling flying insect pests. The noble, tireless bat patrols our parks and backyards, ever faithful, ever vigilant, lest the vicious swarms of mosquitoes target our decks and croquet courts.

Healthy bats do not, typically, attack humans, and in fact are quite passive. Most bites occur through improper handling, and contrary to popular belief, records show that only a handful of people in the United States have ever contracted rabies from bats.

Beyond their status as guardians of the night sky and insect zappers extraordinaire, bats have helped humans in scientific endeavors as diverse as vaccine development, studies on aging and the development of navigational aids for the blind.

Bats Need Our Help

Bats aren't prolific breeders to begin with (most females producing only one offspring each year) and they are very susceptible to environmental changes. They are sensitive to pesticides and, like many wild creatures, are being threatened by loss of their natural habitat. As a result, many bat species are threatened or endangered and therefore protected by various state or federal laws. But as we have seen, even without these legal protections, it's a crime to harm a bat. Here's some advice on how to deal with "bats in your belfry" or other close encounters with Chiroptera, so there can be happy endings for both man and beast.

First of all, a little understanding concerning the habits and behavior of bats can go a long way toward relieving fears and preventing unwanted encounters. Many state conservation departments have websites, brochures and other materials on the subject.

If you happen to find a solitary bat in your home, many times it's enough to open a door or window in the evening to allow exit. If there's a colony freeloading in your attic, sealing ports of entry (i.e., any opening bigger around than a lead pencil) and placing one-way exit devices such as "bat funnels" near former access points may solve the problem. Local animal control may be able to help, or can usually point you in the direction of a "nuisance animal" expert. Our inspection cost \$25 (plus \$20 for a bat funnel and \$5 for sealing foam). It might initially be less money out of your pocket to destroy these elegant, wonderful, regal creatures, but balance the cost of bat-proofing against the annoyance of further incidents, legal issues, poison in your home, rising mosquito populations, and bad karma. Given all that, \$50 is a bargain.

Build Your Own Bat Funnel For Pennies

We bought our first bat funnel from the expert who did our inspection and it was a complicated contraption with a one-way screen door inside, but you can build your own simple excluder for pennies worth of materials. All you need is some 2" PVC pipe (which costs about \$4 for a ten-foot section), some plastic (the wrapper from a stack of paper cups will do fine), and the most ubiquitous household material of all, duct tape.

First, cut about a foot length of the PVC. Round pipe is better for placing into corners or tight spaces, but square PVC downspout is fine for installing in a window as we did. Next, slip the plastic tube over one end of the pipe. Secure the tube to the pipe with duct tape, and there you have it.

Now comes the fun part. You need to install a funnel over a likely exit point or two, and seal all of the other points of entry. These can be any opening 1/2 inch in diameter or larger (that's smaller than a dime), especially around eaves and dormers, windows, doors or other joints. The absolute best way to find out where bats are entering and exiting is to watch for them in the evening as they leave for feeding and return. A second way is to look for clues both inside and outside your home, such as droppings and the little bits of fur and oil they leave around entry and exit points.

You want to seal all of the likely ports (except for one or two, where you'll place the funnels). You can use expanding spray foam, steel wool or caulking. If you use spray foam, be sure to wear gloves and old clothing as it is very difficult to remove. Once the other likely ports are sealed, place the end of the funnel to your chosen exit opening and seal around it, taking care not to obstruct either the opening or the funnel.

Your bats should leave on their own when they go to feed, crawling through the pipe and flying out the plastic tube. Since the tube closes on it's own, they won't be able to gain reentry. Continue to check for droppings, etc. and when you are absolutely certain that the bats have gone (you can wait until winter migration in colder climates) remove the funnel devices and seal those openings too.

How About A Bat Box?

If you're going to exclude bats from your attic, wouldn't it be smart to give them an alternative abode? You've probably seen the Purple Martin houses so many people hang in their neighborhoods. Bats are just as deserving (though admittedly their song isn't as pretty). There's information on the "North American Bat House Project" including detailed instructions on building and installing a bat box available from the website of Bat Conservation International at www.batcon.org on the World Wide Web.

Watch That Door

Many times, a bat will enter when you're bringing in the groceries, especially in the evening. The crafty little darling swoops toward your head (trying to protect you from that kamikaze mosquito that's on a beeline for your earlobe) and before you know it, he's inside. You won't notice until 3 AM when screams are heard from whoever turned on the

bathroom light. So don't hold the door open, especially when the porch light is on, and keep an eye on the top of the door jam until it's closed.

Born To Be Wild

Bats aren't pets. Amazing as it may sound, there are people who find bats novel or interesting or even cute enough to try to keep a captured bat as a pet. There was a story in our local newspaper last Summer about a family with several young children who kept a bat for weeks until it finally bit someone and they called animal control. Bats are beautiful, intriguing and downright heroic, but they also can carry a couple of nasty diseases which you don't want. Although the threat of contracting rabies from a bat is greatly exaggerated, a couple dozen have tested positive in my state so far this year. Close contact is not advisable. In fact, our Department of Public Health recently issued an advisory warning the public to avoid contact and to call animal control to help if removal is necessary. The experts wear heavy gloves and know what they're doing.

In addition to rabies, histoplasmosis (a lung disease caused by a fungus found in bird and bat droppings) poses another danger for humans in close contact with bats or their roosts. Droppings should be disposed of with great care. Wear a mask and wash your hands afterward or call an expert.

A Brief Reprise

At home for lunch the other day, I was walking from the pantry to the sink when I heard this strange noise. I thought at first that it was the chain on the ceiling fan. I looked around. Nada. I took another step and there it was again.

This time I didn't scream when I opened the door, and neither did the tiny, helpless little fellow on the floor at the bottom of the attic stairs. It was almost like a visit from an old friend, and I felt a sense of calm, a sense of peace, a sense of the oneness of the universe after I released him out into the front yard and calmly, peacefully, poured myself another Jack Daniels.