

Next four months critical to Florida's bat population

By [Keith Morelli](#)



This is the season when bats mate and furry moms with beady eyes give birth.
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TAMPA — Wildlife biologists can tell you almost exactly how many panthers and black bears are roaming Florida's woods and have a pretty good idea how many manatees swim in the coastal waters. But when it comes to bats, even the experts shrug their shoulders.

This much is known, according to Catherine Kennedy, senior wildlife assistance biologist with the [Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission](#): There are 13 species of bats that flit through the Florida's night skies and this is the season for love, when bats mate and furry moms with beady eyes give birth.

In Florida, this happens a lot. The Sunshine State is home to more bats than almost any other state, and yet they remain comfortably out of sight.

"Bats are mysterious for a lot of reasons," Kennedy said. "One of those reasons is that

we just don't know a lot about them. There's not a whole lot of research going on about them."

Having bats around is good for a number of reasons, though most people would cringe at the sight of one hanging under their eaves.

In Florida, it's illegal to intentionally kill or harm bats.

“It’s important to protect bats in general because they are so beneficial to humans,” Kennedy said. “The USDA estimates that bats save \$3.6 billion for farmers a year by consuming agricultural pests that would destroy crops. They also are major pollinators of avocado trees, which would have a hard time getting pollinated otherwise. Balsa trees, too.

“So the next time you’re in a coffee shop and you use that little stirrer,” she said, “you have bats to thank for that.”

Then there’s the bugs that bats eat, including Florida’s biggest pest: mosquitoes.

“It’s estimated that each bat consumes 1,000 insects a night, maybe more,” Kennedy said. “Bats are most definitely eating some of the bugs that would be biting you. Without bats we would see a surge in insect populations and who knows what would mean for humans. Certainly, it would not be good.”

There are things people can do to help bats in their neighborhoods, she said, like leaving dead palm fronds on trees.

“Those are natural roosting sites for a lot of the species,” she said. “Anything you can do to leave their little slice of the world in place will help them.”

People also can put up [bat houses](#) in their back yards.



Bats, perhaps the world’s most misunderstood animal thanks to Gothic folklore, misinformation and just plain, baseless fear, need help in Florida to continue on.

“A lot of times, people think bats carry rabies,” Kennedy said. “The incidents of bats with rabies is very low. About .001 percent of bats have rabies.”

And the notion that bats are going to bite people and suck their blood is preposterous. Those bats only live in South and Central America and mostly feed on snoozing livestock at night.

“And they don’t get tangled in your hair,” she said. “They don’t aim at people’s hair. They can see very well.”

The next four months are critical in creating the next generation of bats in Florida. It’s maternity season and bats give birth to live pups beginning in a couple of weeks. The pups generally are left in the roost when new mothers head out to hunt for bugs. That’s why Florida has a law that at certain times bans exclusion devices, which allow bats to leave their roost but block them from returning. Mother bats who can’t get back to the roost can’t nurse their young.

The annual ban is in place from April 16 through Aug. 14.

“These babies do rely on their mothers for milk, and part of the reason why maternity season is in place is that colonies are formed during these months,” Kennedy said. “If you put up exclusion devices and prevent mothers from returning to the roosts, you will kill all of those pups.

“It’s bad for the pups, but it’s bad for humans too,” she said. “When those bats die inside a structure, you end up with a giant mess, lots of decay, and bat bodies falling in the walls and there are strong odors.”

Exclusion devices are virtually the only way to get colonies of bats out of your home. The law is specific about how they are to be used. Under Florida law bat exclusion devices must be in place for four consecutive nights, after which the opening is sealed. That’s enough time for all the bats in the roost to leave and none will be trapped inside.

[Friends of Bats](#) deals with bat infestations.

“That’s all we do,” said John Greenwood, spokesman for the family-owned South Florida company that has been placing exclusion devices for more than a decade. “That’s all we’ve ever done. We don’t do raccoons or other things, just humane removal of bats.”

The business, which ranges across the state, has been operating in Florida for about 15 years, he said, and the company’s 2,000-plus customers range from homeowners wanting bats out from their eaves to warehouses that had bats swooping through the rafters.

“Florida has the second largest bat population in the United States,” Greenwood said. “It’s a very loose market. Most people couldn’t do it. We are very good at it. We don’t do anything else.”



Florida is home to 13 different species of bats, all of which sleep in roosts during the day and emerge at dusk to gorge on insects throughout the night.

Because they are small and have a high metabolism they are voracious eaters and during the maternity season a bat may eat two-thirds of its body weight in bugs each night. That’s the equivalent of a 150-pound human consuming 100 pounds of food per day.

Some bats live alone, others in colonies, the largest of which is believed to contain 100,000 individuals and is located in a [bat house built on the University of Florida campus](#) in Gainesville.

Most common in Florida is the free-tailed bat, which roosts in Spanish tile roofs, inside concrete block walls, in attics and in the joints for concrete structures such as bridges and stadiums.

Free-tail bats can fly at more than 25 mph and forage as far as 30 miles from their roosts at night. They have been found at altitudes of 9,000 feet winging it at 60 mph with a strong tail wind.

The Brazilian free-tailed bat is all over the state, too, and is one of the most abundant native mammals living in Florida’s urban areas. They can form colonies that are as few as 50 and as

many as thousands. Even if you don't see the colony, you will know they are there. With the right wind, it's possible to smell a colony of free-tail bats from half-a-block away.

"They just are fascinating animals," said Holly Ober, associate professor and extension specialist with the Department of Wildlife Ecology & Conservation at the University of Florida. Bats also are somewhat misunderstood.

"I think part of it is that people fear things they don't know much about," she said. "Because they are active at night and fly makes them a little scary. And they've been demonized in movies showing them biting people in the neck. The reality is that there are 1,200 different species of bats in the world, and only three species actually feed on blood."



The future of bats in Florida is cloudy.

"It's very difficult to know because they are nocturnal and roost in so many places," Ober said. "It's not easy for us to tell if the numbers are declining or increasing. The general thought is that they are declining."

In many parts of the country a disease known as white nose syndrome is decimating massive colonies of bats. That malady hasn't cropped up in Florida, but loss of habitat is the main reason scientists believe the bat population here is losing ground.

"We are losing habitat that bats use for roosting and foraging," Ober said. "They naturally prefer to roost — sleep during the day — in places like large tree cavities, or in dead or dying trees where the bark is peeling off." As more and more humans move into the state, those dead trees are removed, leaving whole colonies of bats homeless and looking for new places to call home.

"There are less and less of those places where bats like to roost," she said, "They go into buildings and other man-made structures because they can't find natural sites they prefer to be in."

In the world of animals, she said, bats are unique.

"They are the only mammal capable of true flight," she said. "They are awake during the time of day most of us are asleep and they have a different existence than we do. They don't rely on the sense of vision very much. They are tuned into the sounds around them.

"Bats live in a fascinating world," she said, "far removed from ours."

kmorelli@tampatrib.com

(813) 259-7760