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Bats in the Belfry?

by John Greenwood

It's a cliché, of course, but most Florida residents don't realize that even though Florida is effectively a huge wildlife sanctuary, bats make-up around 25 percent to 50 percent of the total mammal population here. We have the second largest bat population in the US (only Texas has more). There are over 900 species of bats world-wide and some fifteen of these species are considered "permanent residents" of Florida. All but one of these Florida bat species is of the sub-order called "microchiroptera" or "small hand-wing." Of these fourteen species, each individual animal eats 2-3,000 small flying insects each night, such as moths and mosquitoes. This is why the State protects them. We couldn't live in Florida without the bats. By the way, the 15th of the species are new arrivals, Jamaican Fruit Bats that recently took-up residence in Key West, having flown the 90 miles over from Cuba. Imagine that—more illegal immigrants!

Problem Bats

Although bats are hugely beneficial to the environment, they can cause serious problems for people when the two species co-exist in the same environment. There are health concerns, of course (although it is recognized that less than 1 percent of the bat population carries rabies, they do roost in colonies numbering in the hundreds, thousands, and tens of thousands). Histoplasmosis, a chronic respiratory disease caused by a spore released from disturbed dry guano, should also be a concern, although recorded cases of this disease are very rare. Mostly, the problem

is one of nuisance. The odor and staining (from urine, guano and oils in the bats' fur) can become hard to tolerate and make units and houses difficult or impossible to inhabit or even sell. The two most common species we encounter in buildings here in Florida are the Mexican (Brazilian) Free-tailed Bat (*Tadarida brasiliensis*) and the Evening Bat (*Nycticeius humeralis*).

The Humane (and Legal) Solution

It is entirely possible to humanely exclude bats from structures that people inhabit and—more importantly—to keep them out of these structures. Many companies and individuals attempt this process but, sadly, do not have the requisite understanding of bat behavior and building structure to be successful (ref. our article "Bat Removal & Exclusion", *FLCAJ*, September, 2006).

Case Study: Sorrento Inlet Condominium Association

In November, 2005, we were asked to propose a

solution to the on-going bat infestation problem in multiple units and buildings at Sorrento Inlet. Previously, different companies, approaches, and methodologies had been tried—all without success. Located in beautiful Nokomis, on Florida's Gulf Coast, this friendly and well-knit community had been plagued for years by relatively large populations of bats living beneath the Spanish S-type tiles of the roofs above their homes. Many of the units and buildings showed no sign of infestation at the time of our inspection, but the Board knew that once we started to exclude the animals from infested units/buildings, they would seek a new home nearby. We therefore worked on all of the buildings.

We were contracted by the board and began our work in December of that year (completing it in late January of 2006). We first determined the various species of bat resident at the site and subsequently identified the primary entry/egress points for these animals. Next, we secured all currently uninfested buildings and unpopulated areas of the infested buildings that were vulnerable to possible future infestation (many of the bats in Florida have an average life-span of around 35 years and they are extremely territorial—any females born or who have given birth at a specific site will persist for years to return). In the third phase of the operation, we installed exclusion devices that allow the animals to exit safely but prevent them from returning. The fourth phase involved us checking that the bats had vacated, ensuring that they had not found an alternate roost in the buildings (they only need a gap of one-half inch or less). Phase five saw us taking down the exclusion devices and permanently sealing their previous entry points. Our guarantee then came into force. Because of the territorial nature of these animals, combined with the life expectancy of each individual bat, a guaranteed exclusion is very important.

Aftermath and Raison D'être

The Board at Sorrento Inlet, like many of our customers, was very concerned with the detrimental effects on quality of life and health issues being suffered by their residents/owners as a result of the bat infestation problem. Richard Cannarella, Secretary of the Association and



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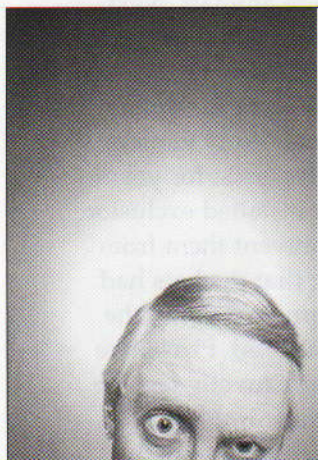
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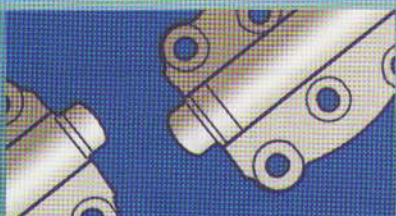


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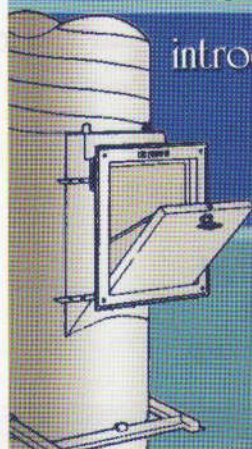


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primary liaison with us, subsequently offers the following comments (December, 2006):

"The problem was becoming unbearable. The stench from the bats, combined with our concern for our elderly and infirm residents—specifically the health issues involved—made a permanent and effective solution imperative. We had tried over the years to engage people to help us deal with this problem, but without success. Finally, we contracted a professional organization, dedicated solely to bat exclusion and our problem was resolved."

Why Worry?

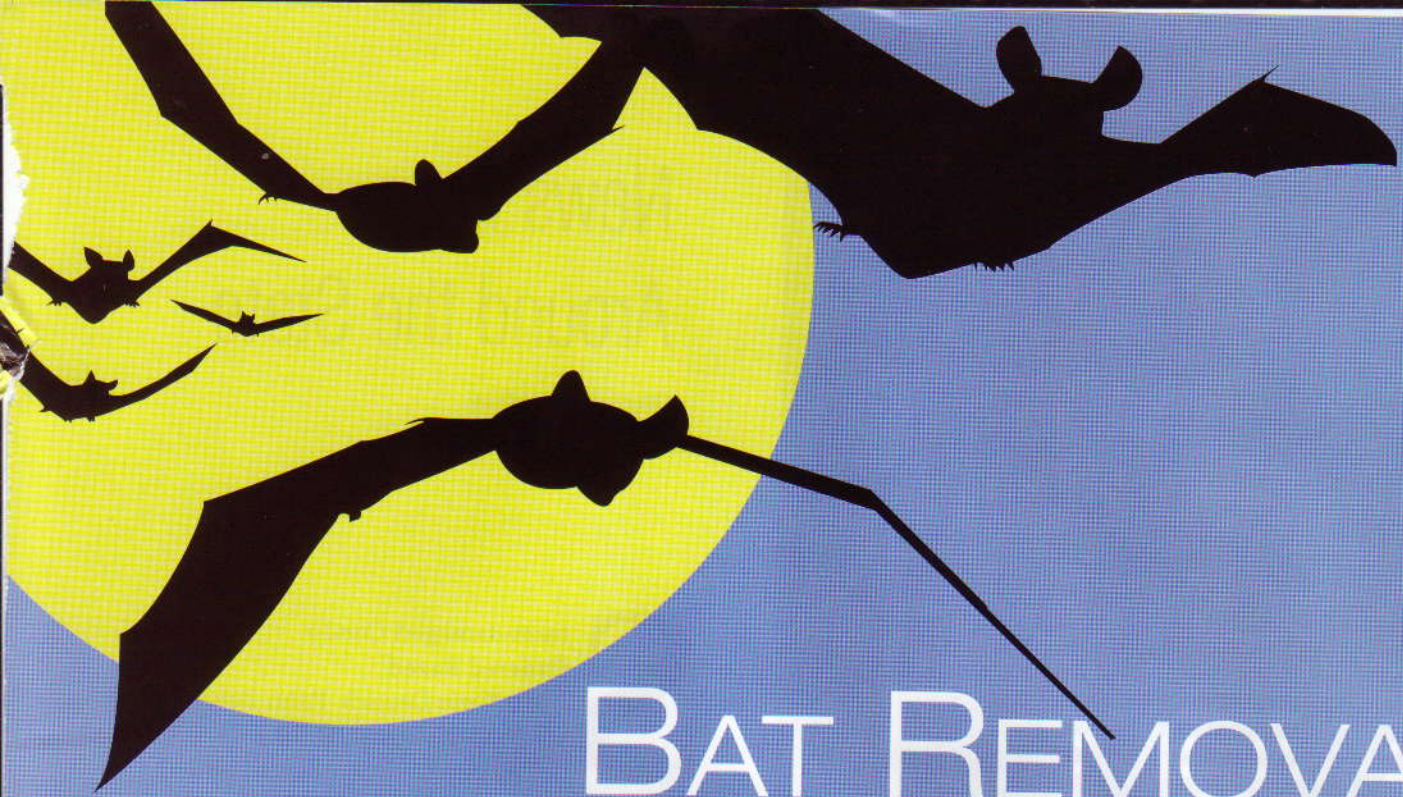
Why should boards, HOAs, and managers worry about bat infestation problems?

- First and foremost, the health, well-being, and quality of life of residents.
- Then, one must consider the effect on property value.
- Bats' urine is very corrosive and can damage the membrane present in the roof.
- Most people will not buy or rent a property that is infested with bats.
- The potential liability of people being harmed by the presence of bats, once this problem is known by the management/board and left unchecked.

Conclusion

Bats are wonderful animals, but so are people! We need to ensure that bats continue to thrive and that people can continue to go about their lives here in paradise, without either party harming the other. This is nature's balance.

John Greenwood is the Customer Consultant for Friends of Bats, Headquartered in Palm City, FL. ■



BAT REMOVAL & EXCLUSION

by John Greenwood

In an effort to provide the most useful information possible, FLCAJ asked our vendors to help by listing the most common scams or deceptions in their industries. This is the second of an ongoing series of these tools.

Bat infestation can be a serious problem for condominium associations and HOAs. In addition to the various health concerns, odor, noise, staining, and damage caused by bats' waste products can severely impact the quality of life of residents. Very few companies specialize exclusively in dealing with this issue (most are general animal trappers or pest control companies). Some of the more common "scams" include the following:

1. "We will catch all of your bats and relocate them 100 miles away." This sounds plausible but doesn't work for several reasons: First, the species of bat found in Florida can roost in colonies numbering in the hundreds, thousands, or tens of thousands—it's impossible to catch them all. Second, bats are capable of migrating south for the winter, when they live in colder northern states, and returning to the same holes in the same building when spring arrives. They are extremely territorial and will return to their established roosts.
2. "We will install ultrasound devices in your attic." Here's what William H. Kern, Jr., Dept. of Wildlife Ecology & Conservation (University of Florida) has to say, "There is no data supporting the assertion that these devices keep bats from occupying a building. Bats should be able to find the ultrasound shadows and roost in those areas."

3. "We will install mothballs in your attic." Naphthalene is the active ingredient in mothballs, and in order to have any effect, it needs to be used in such large quantities as to pose health risks to humans.

4. "We will deposit poison in the infested areas." Apart from the fact that bats are insectivores and would not eat poison, it is against the law to deliberately harm these mammals (enforced by Florida's Fish & Wildlife Commission).

5. "We will shine powerful lights on the building." Bats are not blind and see perfectly well and because they only eat small flying insects, they are drawn to the insects that are attracted by the light.

The best way to avoid costly mistakes when dealing with a bat infestation problem is to perform due diligence research on the company proposing the "solution." Check with the Better Business Bureau, the Florida Bat Conservancy (a non-profit group) and ask for references of previous work.

In conclusion, I return to W. H. Kern: "Exclusion is the best means of removing bats from buildings and other manmade structures."

[References: "Bat Exclusion Methods", William H. Kern, Jr., *Proc. East. Wildl. Damage Mgmt. Conf.* 7:139-148.1997; www.floridabats.org; www.friendsofbats.com]

John Greenwood is owner of Friends of Bats in Palm City, FL. ■



Bats Are Our Friends!

by John Greenwood

Much maligned and much misunderstood, bats are an essential part of the ecosystem here in Florida. Many myths, legends, and, frankly, old wives' tales surround the mysterious lives of these special animals. In part, the plethora of misinformation and fear-mongering surrounding bats is a result of their "secretive" nocturnal lifestyle. Bats are almost never seen in daylight—not because they will shrivel up and die (as in the *Dracula* movies)—but because their natural predators will be able to see them and eat them. Hawks, owls, and snakes all eat bats and almost all kinds of birds will attack them. Speaking of *Dracula*, the famous English novelist and author of that book, Bram Stoker, is almost single-handedly responsible for the bad "rap" that bats

have to live with today! That said, given that there are more bats inhabiting Florida than any other single mammal and given the fact that they often choose to roost in our homes and condominiums, perhaps it is a good idea to explore some of these myths, establish some facts and start to understand our "neighbors" a little better.

"How blessed are some people, whose lives have no fears, no dreads, to whom sleep is a blessing that comes nightly and brings nothing but sweet dreams."

[Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, 1897]

MYTH: Bats drink people's blood, while they are asleep.

FACT: There are nearly 1,000 species of bats world-wide (approximately 15 of these species live in Florida) and of these, only three species are vampire bats and they only inhabit Latin America (not Transylvania)! Vampire bats do not like the taste of human blood and feed primarily on the blood of chickens and



cattle. One teaspoonful a day is enough for each bat and the "host" providing the "meal" is invariably not even aware of it! All of our Florida bats are insectivores, eating their own body weight in flying insects (including mosquitoes) every night. That's the human equivalent of around 50 pizzas! The saliva from vampire bats contains an anti-coagulant that is now being used to treat heart attack patients here in the US.

MYTH: Bats are blind.

FACT: All bats can see. Some species have excellent eyesight, although in common with many other mammals their vision is in black and white.

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MYTH: Bats are mice with wings.

FACT: Bats are mammals; they are not at all related to rodents. In fact, some scientists would like to see them re-classified as primates, since they meet all of the established criteria. Every bone and every organ in your body is replicated in a bat, although the proportions are very different (if you were a bat, your heart would be the size of a basketball)! Bats even have opposing thumbs. We are the bat's closest living relative: their DNA is a better match to ours than to that of any other animal on the planet (although chimpanzees are our own closest relative)!

MYTH: All bats carry rabies.

FACT: Approximately half of one percent of bats carries rabies (the latest study we have seen puts this figure at 0.6 percent).

MYTH: An infestation of bat colonies in my condominium building will grow exponentially as the babies proliferate.

FACT: Although some species of bat can live for up to 35 years, they are, for their size, the slowest reproducing animals on the planet. Most bats will have only one pup (baby) per year (some will typically have twins). Like us, newly-born bats are quite helpless and are breast-fed by their mothers. Also like us, if an infant loses its mother, another nursing mother

is likely to "volunteer" to nurse the youngster and bring it up as her own. That said, bats can and do roost in very large colonies numbering in the hundreds, thousands, and tens of thousands.

These are some of the myths about bats dispelled and—in learning more about them—we begin to understand how important they are to our environment. Bats have inhabited the earth for a long time, flying over the heads of the original dinosaurs in the dark, primeval swamplands of pre-history. In today's world and—more importantly for us—in today's Florida, bats are protected because of the terrific job they do for us in insect control. Florida's Game Fish and Wildlife Commission (FG&FWC) is charged by the State to protect these precious animals. Notwithstanding the above, we all recognize that bats can cause serious problems for people when the two species inhabit the same structures. Therefore, the State Government will allow us to "humanely exclude" these animals from buildings that people also use. This means removing (excluding) the animals without harming them and preventing them from returning, so that the people are protected and the bat colonies can relocate elsewhere and continue in their tireless pest control duties that help make Florida the paradise that it is.

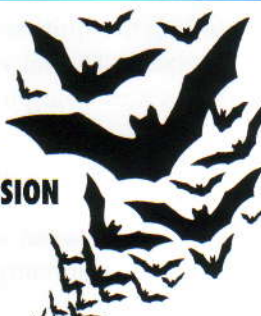
This brings us to address the more serious myths that threaten the very survival of these precious animals and substantively, the "FACTS" quoted below are taken

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directly from papers published by the University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, and from Florida Statutes (828.12, §775.082 and Title 39-12.009 of the Florida Wildlife Code):

MYTH: I don't want to kill the bats in my building, so I'll just wait until they have all flown out at night and block up the hole(s).

FACT: Not all of the bats leave the roost each night. Typically, 20–25 percent of the animals leave at one time, and in the case of cold or inclement weather, it is likely that none of them will leave at all. "A person who unnecessarily overloads, overdrives, torments, deprives of necessary sustenance or shelter or unnecessarily mutilates, or kills

any animal... is guilty of a misdemeanor of the first degree, punishable as provided in §775.082 or by a fine of not more than \$5,000, or both." Furthermore, the Statutes state that: "A person who intentionally commits an act to any animal which results in the cruel death, or excessive or repeated infliction of unnecessary pain or suffering, or causes the same to be done, is guilty of a felony of the third degree, punishable as provided in §755.082 or by a fine of not more than \$10,000 or both." Bear in mind that these penalties relate to "an animal."

MYTH: "My home is my castle. If any person invades my home, I can shoot them. The same applies to bats—or perhaps I can poison them."

FACT: "... nuisance or destructive wildlife may not be taken with a gun and light, steel traps, or poisons without a specific permit issued by the executive director of the FG&FWC. Since NO POISONS OR FUMIGANTS ARE LEGAL OR REGISTERED FOR CONTROL OF BATS IN FLORIDA, the FG&FWC cannot issue any permits to poison bats."

In summary, bats are very misunderstood and are hugely important for our environment here in Florida—we just don't want them living in our homes. In the words of W.H. Kern, Jr., Research Assistant, Dept. of Entomology and Nematology, University of Florida: "exclusion is the only recommended permanent solution to an unwanted bat colony in a building."

John Greenwood is the lead Consultant for "Friends of Bats," operating throughout Florida, for more information, visit www.friendsofbats.com. ■



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