

### 3-16-12 Bats Belie Common Beliefs

I wouldn't know much about bats if weren't for some personal experiences with them. The first time I was amazed by the sight of bats was when a date told me he could make them appear. Isn't that romantic? I had no idea what he was referring to or had up his sleeve but I was curious enough to go for the bait. "Okay, show me the bats." He bent down to pick up some roadside sand and tossed it up toward the streetlight near where we were standing. I was shocked and in awe with what followed, as I witnessed one after another bat swoop through the sand-speckled spotlight in search of the insects their echolocation ability indicated were present. It may not be nice to fool Mother Nature but all's fair in love. I hope no bats developed stomach aches from swallowed grit.

It wasn't until I became a health agent that I realized bats can carry and spread rabies. Each August I would try to warn the public of the increased chance that young bats venturing from their roosts might lose their way from their cozy attic nest, right into a home rather than out of it. Each year I received a notice on this topic from our Department of Public Health. (I'll tell you in a bit what to do if you find a bat in your house.)

It was again through a more personal experience that I learned why we should keep our eyes open for bats in the very early spring. It was several years ago now that my daughter woke up in the middle of the night to the sound so her three year old son crying and calling out for help about something flying around in his room. When she went to his room, sure enough, there she saw a bat flying about. What followed was a hellish night, with her husband away for job related training and she alone making trips to two hospitals with an infant and toddler because she was led to believe that her son needed to be treated for rabies "just in case".

The advice to begin treating her son with a series of prophylactic shots was unfortunate because the first hospital staff only knew half the protocol. If they had understood the bigger picture, they would have taken it seriously but would have been able to tell my daughter to stay home, and go back to bed. Why? It was safe to wait because she had hired someone that night at about two o'clock in the morning to capture that flying mammalian visitor to my grandson's room.

There she was, all alone in the middle of the night, husband gone and her health agent mother did not hear the phone ring. So, she went to the yellow pages and looked up animal control. The man she reached explained his service and the cost and then added, "You have to make up your mind in the next twenty minutes before I cross the bridge. You see, I've been out on bat calls since five thirty this morning and I'm tired. This happens every spring on the first warm day." My daughter asked him to turn around and capture one more. He not only caught

the bat, he also understood the importance of getting it tested for rabies, since the bat was discovered in the room of a sleeping toddler.

“In the room of a sleeping toddler or infant or, in fact, anyone who is not capable of being fully aware and able to articulate what has happened”, determines the need for capture and testing. “Not fully aware or capable of articulating” includes the inebriated and the mentally challenged. Any of those people may not even be aware that as they slept, they were bitten by a bat, as the teeth of a bat are so tiny.

Most bats are not rabid. However, because of their unique relationship to humans, in that sometimes our attics are used for roosting, there is the increased chance of contact with them. That increased chance of contact also increases the chance of crossing paths with a rabid one.

So, bats usually leave us alone (unless your romantic date is luring them to your vicinity). Bats sometimes enter a house on the first warm day(s) in spring when they are just waking up or the young ones sometimes enter a house in August because they are young and recently received their flying license.

If you are awake when the bat enters the home, you can let it go out a door or window. If you were asleep and especially if a child or mentally challenged person was asleep when the bat was discovered in the bedroom, it is important to catch and test the bat. If the test (which only takes a couple days) comes back as positive for rabies, then the person is assumed exposed and treated successfully with a series of prophylactic injections. There is a window of opportunity of up to about a week for beginning that treatment, leaving plenty of time for testing the animal. If there was exposure and the person does not recognize it, rabies is deadly and once the disease has begun, there is no treatment.

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health has a 24-7 epidemiologist on call for answering questions on such topics as rabies exposure. Call them at 617 983 6800. Don't be left in the dark at any time of the day when it comes to life-saving information.

*Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax, MA. You can reach her at 781 293 6768 or [cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us](mailto:cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us)*