

## 8-7-09 Bat Facts

Each year around this time of year, I receive a notice from our friends at the Department of Public Health reminding us that bats can carry the rabies virus and that bats have incredibly small teeth. If you have ever seen a bat, you know how tiny the mouth is and so you might think it funny that DPH bothers to point out the obvious: small mouths have small teeth. They take the time to tell us because, in the case of bats, there may not be a visible mark left by a bite. You also might wonder why we need to see the mark since getting bitten would be a known event. Right? But what if the victim of the bat bite was an infant and could not tell you? What if the recipient of the bat's attention was intoxicated, asleep or in any way mentally impaired? In those cases, if we can't be certain about contact, then catching and submitting the bat for rabies testing is in order. Within 48 hours you'd have the results and if negative, you're all set. If positive, then you can't take the chance. Rabies can be prevented with a series of vaccinations but cannot be treated once it has developed. In that case, the exposed person dies.

Considering this set of possibilities, it is a good idea to keep your screens repaired and vents covered with wire mesh to prevent bats from entering your home. If we can prevent the bats from entering the home, we are unlikely to ever have contact with them. It would be nice to avoid ever having to worry about the exposure to the deadly rabies virus.

Just ask my daughter, Kate. She lives in Connecticut with her husband, one year old Taryn and four year old Colin. In early June of 2008 she was awakened in the middle of the night by two year-old Colin's cry for help because a bat was in his room. The wildlife guy she called to remove it knew that since my daughter could not be certain that her son was not bitten by the bat, he would catch it and send it to their state lab for testing. Since that time, they have had five other bat encounters in their house and they have learned a lot about bats. Here's just a little of that knowledge and why she learned making it imperative to learn about these creatures:

The first warm day in the spring is the first peak of bat activity. (That was Kate's first encounter. When she called the wildlife handler at 1:30 in the morning, he went over the various services and charges and told her to make up her mind before he crossed the bridge because he had been out responding to bat calls since 5:00 a.m. the previous day! ) After the awakening with spring fever, bats do a little figuring out on that first day of adventure and then they settle in to having their babies. In August those babies have been weaned and are venturing out on their own for the first time. They behave like any other child; they make mistakes and learn by them.

When looking for evidence of bats living in your home, look for their small droppings on doorsteps, decks or in the attic. They are not as skinny as mice droppings and they are filled with the iridescent bits and pieces of the insects they eat. If the bats reside under overhangs on the exterior of your home, you can expect to see blackened streaks from their urine. If these fascinating little mammals have to rub against something while skooching their way under say, a vent or shingle, you will find a dark somewhat greasy looking stain, like the ones cats leave from rubbing their backs against their favorite corner in your house while they purr and give you that look that says, 'Don't you just love me and don't you want to feed me or scratch my back?'

Once you see and understand the evidence, begin to look for their exits by sitting outdoors and watching at dusk. As it begins to get dark, make note of how many and from what openings they leave. If they are only individuals roosting under a shingle or overhang, then do nothing. Think of them as your bug reduction program. If they are exiting from your attic, then you should start to plug those holes. That's what Kate's husband did on July 25.

What happened next? Did he plug them up sufficiently? Was it the best time of the year and the optimal time of the day or night when he did that work? Find out next week as I continue the story and as I discover how much we need bats in our local environment and throughout the world, because that's a fact, also.

*Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for the Town of Halifax, MA. Do you have any bat tales for her? (She collects insects, too.) She can be reached at 781 293 6768 or [cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us](mailto:cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us)*