

8-14-09 Bats Are Beneficial, Too

My oldest daughter, Kate, lives in charming Connecticut with her husband, Jim, and their two children. The local bats think it is charming, also. In fact, they enjoy it so much, they have visited her house six times in the last year. The elderly woman who lives across the street grew up in Kate's house as the first family, with Katie's being only the second. She tells my daughter, "Oh, yes, they liked to fly into that house when I lived there, too."

Well, after venturing to hospitals in the middle of the night and having wildlife handlers remove bats, my daughter and son in law decided enough was enough. They were going to take measures to prevent future visits from these mysterious creatures and, so, on July 25, my son in law was on bat duty, plugging up any tiny holes he could find into the attic.

The following week, while out during their first ever use of a babysitter, they received a call from, you guessed it, the babysitter. There was a very small bat flying down the stair well and into the living room. They booked it back to Mystic, CT from Massachusetts and on the way gave a call to the wildlife guy who captured their first bat visitor in June of 2008.

"You plugged up holes in July?" he asks. "It's best to wait until the middle of August, when the newly weaned youngsters are venturing out on their own for the first time. Before that, they are stuck in the roosting area, with only some practice flying going on, perhaps, while Mom is out."

Oh, how I could relate! You know how that goes if you've had teenagers. You don't want them practicing their driving skills in your yard while you are out, now do you? Of course you don't.

Here's what they learned about keeping bats out of the attic:

If there is more than one exit, plug all but one with steel wool stuffed in and filling with foam insulation over it. Give them a few days to practice using the one remaining hole and then, after dark, you can plug that one in the same manner. While this project is going on, plan on sealing with wide tape around your door or pull-down from the attic each time you leave it, as this was the most recent entry point at my daughter's house. A baby bat slipped into her house through the edge of the pull-down stairs and could not figure out how to back into the attic. Poor little thing! It did not know how to get out from this new place inside the home or how to get back to its cozy insulated home

Once you've prevented bats from living in your belfry or you've discovered that they are only living harmlessly outdoors, it's time to sit back and appreciate them. That's right! They are amazing mammals and wonderfully beneficial to the earth's ecosystem.

Some bats visit plants and eat fruit, helping to pollinate them and to spread their seeds, greatly assisting our troubled and diminishing supply of bees. Each insect-eating bat consumes thousands each night. They eat so many insects that along with birds and bees, they are a farmer's best friends.

In fact, a few decades ago, Betty and Tony Koch of Oregon became so concerned about the amount of pesticides they were using at their 219 acre orchard that they decided to attract insect eating wildlife to their farm in hopes they could make a difference. When they saw that hundreds of birdhouses were reducing the need for pesticides, Tony

started to build bat houses as well. With many refinements and discoveries made along the way, with his scientific approach of trial and error, Tony Koch became convinced he was not wasting his time.

His hunch, his hard work and his observations paid off. By allowing and assisting the bats to proliferate, they ate insects after dark and birds did in the daytime. Tony saw a significant reduction in the earworms found on his corn. In fact, he went from spraying his orchards and cornfields thirteen times a season to only twice, applied after the birds and bats left for their winter migration.

I found this story of the Koch's Bird Haven Farm on the Bat Conservation International website. This is the best, most informative and most interesting site I have found on bats. As you can guess from the title, the website is trying to bring worldwide attention to the importance of bats and the worrisome reduction in their breeding and feeding habitats. I learned that bats have very specific methods of and places for feeding. One prefers water's edge. Another prefers to feed while flying over open fields. Some roost in old growth forests, while others prefer manmade structures.

At this fantastic interactive website, I also read accounts from the nineteenth century of the skies being blackened with huge numbers of migrating bats. That certainly is not the case anymore. Those thousands of bats lived somewhere before they migrated. Perhaps their homes of the past no longer exist. Maybe we can do something about that.

Not only can we live with nature, we must never forget that we are dependent on it. That's a fact.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for the Town of Halifax. She is in favor of helping people to keep bats out of their houses but also supporting bats in our outdoor environments. She can be reached at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us