

Nature in the Neighborhood – October 2022

## The Benefit of Bats in Your Backyard

“The baby bat /screamed out in fright, /turn on the dark, /I'm afraid of the light.” ~ *Shel Silverstein*. As Halloween approaches and the days grow shorter, our fears of the dark things that inhabit the night often grow larger: mischievous goblins, witches on broomsticks, and of course, vampires disguised as bats.

While most of us no longer believe in goblins, witches, and vampires, bats continue to be misunderstood and often people are afraid of them. In fact, it should be the other way around as bats have more to fear from us: loss of habitat, poisoning from pesticides, and the disrupting effects of excessive artificial light.

To counter a few of the bat misconceptions, here are some facts:

- **Bats are not blind**, in fact, some have better eyesight than we do. Added to that, bats (like dolphins) use echolocation to get around -- that is, they emit sound waves and listen for the echo to locate things, like the cave walls or bugs to eat.
- **Bats are not pests**. They're often thought of as flying rats, when they are not related (bats are under the species order *Chiroptera*, not *Rodentia* which makes them more closely related to primates than rodents). Rather than being a pest, bats help keep insect pests, such as mosquitos, in check. It's estimated that the non-toxic pest-control services of bats is \$3.7 billion.

And it's not just pest control, bats provide other services to us as well, such as pollinating plants and distributing seeds (including a species of agave that is a source of tequila!). In fact, because the United Nations found bats to be extremely beneficial to the food chain, it designated 2011-12 as the International Year of the Bat.

- **Yes, there are vampire bats**. Three out of the over 1,400 species are vampire bats, but they do not transform into Bram Stoker's Count Dracula, bite you on the neck, and turn you into the undead. And rather than sucking blood, vampire bats make a small cut with their teeth and then lap up the flowing blood with their tongues -- but don't worry they tend to feed off mammals like cattle, horses, and the like, not us.

- **What about COVID-19 and rabies?** While the virus that causes COVID-19 is similar to a virus that has been found in horseshoe bats in China (a species not found here), the true origin of the virus and how it first infected people is still unknown. As for rabies, bats can get rabies like any other mammal but only about 1 % of bats are infected. You can also only get rabies if a rabid animal bites you or if you come in contact with its saliva, not by them flying around overhead. All that said, you should never touch a bat, especially one you see during the day and that is acting strangely.

You can help increase the habitat of these beneficial animals in our neighborhood by putting up “bat houses.” They’re easy to build and instructions for doing so can be readily found on-line. The Conservancy also has a few bat houses built by Swampscott Middle School students for sale. If you’re interested in one, email us at [swampscottconservancy@gmail.com](mailto:swampscottconservancy@gmail.com).

You can also help them by “turning on the dark,” that is, avoiding or reducing outdoor artificial lighting unless absolutely necessary. If you do use outdoor lights, you can limit the light’s intensity, direct the light so it’s only lighting the areas that need to be lit, and install a motion sensor or timer to limit the amount of time light is used.

If you want to learn more about these interesting, and sometimes cute (yes, cute), flying mammals, check out the presentation by Dr. Charlie Chester that was hosted by Swampscott Conservancy and can be found on its YouTube page: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=J4sq3PmLow8&t=470s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J4sq3PmLow8&t=470s) Aside from informative bat facts, this presentation includes a number of stunning photos of bats.

We at the Conservancy wish everyone a safe and happy Halloween. And we hope if you see a bat flying by, instead of screaming you’ll give it a smile and a wink and a big thank you for being one of many creatures that keep nature in our neighborhood thriving.

Toni Bandrowicz, President  
The Swampscott Conservancy  
[swampscottconservancy.org](http://swampscottconservancy.org)