

## October 2008: Meditations on Bats

Along with millions of other movie-goers in the past few months, my husband and I saw "The Dark Knight," otherwise known as "the latest Batman movie." Former comic-book geeks, we both enjoyed the movie, but as a bat lover, I was a little disappointed. For one thing, Batman does not fly like a real bat. His long swoops off skyscrapers using his spread cape like giant wings are dramatic, but not bat-like. Bats flutter, flapping alternating wings, as opposed to most birds, which flap both wings at the same time. While Batman was appropriately nocturnal, he also didn't spend any time in a real cave either. Granted, a human bat can't be expected to follow the natural order, but the spotless underground vault in which Batman keeps his suit and several high-tech cars and weapons can hardly be likened to a bat cave.

Years ago I had the opportunity while in college to visit a bat cave in Vermont that is protected by the Nature Conservancy as a home for the endangered Indiana bat. To keep out those who might disturb the bats, the cave was kept gated and locked. Finding the cave and getting in--our biology professor had the key--made the outing arcane enough to elicit jokes about visiting the Bat Cave. But reality was a dark, dirty hole in the ground smelling of bat droppings. Further into the cave, however, dozens of bats flitting erratically in our flashlight beams had the look of a wild video game. We were entranced. If we stood still, the squeaking bats came close, never hitting us but seeming to fly through every available space in the air around us. It was hard to overcome the initial impulse to defensively flail our arms around and just relax, trusting that bats really aren't "blind as a bat."

According to our professor, all the bats we saw that day appeared to be little brown bats, one of the most common North American species. He caught one and gently held it so that we could see it up close and marvel at how its "fingers" elongated into fleshy wings. Its fur was the softest I have ever felt, like the finest fur on a baby rabbit's belly. It struck me then how bats are mammals just like we are. In this cave, clinging to the damp limestone walls, mother bats nurse baby bats. For some reason, the impact of that simple fact has forever since endeared these little animals to me.

Besides seeing the Batman movie, I've also had bats on my mind because my husband is reading Dracula to me each night when we go to bed. I have insomniac tendencies, so he reads to help me fall asleep, but Dracula might not have been the best choice for inducing slumber. Dracula's victim Lucy is startled

awake each night by the sound of giant bat wings fluttering against her garlic-garlanded window--not an image to help one relax. And of course then there's all the creepy blood-sucking. (Although to be fair to vampire bats, they don't actually suck the blood of their hosts, they inject the wound with an anti-coagulant in their saliva called draculin and then lap the flowing blood.)

While there are no vampire bats commonly found north of Mexico, there is always the fear in Maine, of course, of rabid bats. Mention bats and someone always has a story of a bat that flew into their bedroom one night and terrified the family till they got it out. Nationally, the federal Center for Disease Control (CDC) reports that bats account for almost 25% of all rabies cases. But here in Maine, according to statistics compiled by the State CDC, they only account for about 10% on average each year. The Infectious Disease Epidemiology Program and the Maine Health and Environmental Testing Laboratory of the Maine CDC, reported that of 86 rabies cases in 2007, only 9 of them were bats.

In this neck of the woods last year (and in fact, across the country) you were far more likely to encounter a rabid raccoon (38 cases) or skunk (31 cases). While one should always be cautious of any wild animal that is acting strangely--and that includes a bat flying inside one's house or during daylight hours--for the most part, bats are unfairly maligned. For many people, the bat's association with rabies, vampires, and creepy Halloween symbolism is too much to overcome. Because of these fears, and because bats are flying, nocturnal animals, most people never get the chance to see bats up close and really appreciate them.

In fact, bats can be startlingly beautiful creatures. A couple of years ago my husband and I were birding on Monhegan during fall migration when I noticed what I thought was a bright red bird, perhaps a cardinal, flying erratically about the Meadow. When I got it in my binoculars, however, I realized it was a big red bat fluttering around in broad daylight. Neither of us had ever seen a bat that large or that red. We were fascinated, not fully believing what we'd seen. At dinner we ran into a fellow birder, described what we'd seen, and asked if he knew what it was. "A red bat," he replied matter-of-factly. "They sometimes migrate during the day." Who knew? Now when I'm birding during migration, I always hope I'll see another red bat, a truly striking and unusual animal.

An avid fly-fisherman who sometimes fishes a good hatch well into the evening, my husband has often experienced bats flying around him while he casts into the dark. They're chasing the same flies that he's trying to imitate on the end of his line, and he worries that he'll hook a bat accidentally as he casts. He has tried to

describe for me what it's like standing out in a river at night while the stars overhead reflect in the water and bats fly all around you. A few weeks ago when we were walking down a tree-canopied street in our neighborhood at dusk, I think I got a sense of what he was talking about. All around us and over our heads in the dark tunnel of trees, we could see the images of bats as they flickered against the paler sky. When we reached our house, we stood beneath the stars watching with childish glee as bats flitted through our own backyard, and then went inside to read the next chapter of Dracula.

**Written by Kristen Lindquist**



101 Mount Battie Street, Camden, Maine 04843

ph. 207.236.7091 fax 207.236.0612

email: [kristenl@coastalmountains.org](mailto:kristenl@coastalmountains.org)