

Bat watching

By Mark Kiser



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Although much maligned, bats are among our most fascinating and beneficial wildlife. Bats are important pollinators and seed dispersers, and are primary predators of night-flying insects. Bats are the only mammals capable of true flight, and worldwide there are more than 1,100 species, accounting for nearly one-quarter of all mammal species. They are found nearly everywhere on earth except polar regions and some remote islands. Florida has 13 resident bat species, all of which eat insects, including many destructive yard, garden and forest pests. Seven additional bat species have been recorded in the Sunshine State, including four pollen- and nectar-feeding “strays” from the Caribbean.

You might be surprised to learn bats are quite fun to watch. While this is not exactly like bird-watching and may sound strange to some, it’s a great activity to share with family and friends. You don’t need special training or equipment to enjoy their nightly flight activities (a comfortable lounge chair or blanket comes in handy, though),

Left: The author inspects a pair of bat houses at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden in Miami. These experimental houses were specially built for Wagner’s bonneted bat. **Above, left:** Big brown bats are common throughout the U.S. and feed primarily on beetles. **Above, right:** Wagner’s bonneted bat is found only in South Florida – the only known roosts are a pair of bat houses in Lee County.

and there's even a "Vacationer's Guide to Bat Watching" available (published by Bat Conservation International, a non-profit organization in Austin, Tex.) to help you locate great sites around North America. You need not travel far to see bats on the wing, however, as you probably have bats feeding around your back yard or neighborhood.

Most birds (and bird watchers) tend to be active

during daylight, whereas North American bats generally are secretive and best viewed at dusk, when they begin their nightly patrols in search of insects. One method of finding bats is simply taking an evening stroll around your local lake or pond, where you may spy one skimming the surface for a drink, or in hot pursuit of a moth or mosquito. The eastern red bat, a common and colorful tree-roosting species, is often seen foraging around streetlights. Nature centers around the state often have "bat and owl prowls," night hikes where you can learn about, and experience, Florida's nocturnal creatures.

Hands down, though, the most exciting method of viewing bats is sitting and watching a large colony exit its roost. Great places to see bat emergences are caves, bridges and bat houses like the one at the University of Florida in Gainesville. Since 1995, this college campus has been one of the premier bat-watching sites in eastern North America. An estimated 100,000 Brazilian free-tailed bats (despite the name, they are also native to the United States) and small numbers of another species known as the southeastern myotis currently reside in the 18 x 18-foot bat house at Lake Alice



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Selena Kiser with Bat Conservation International documents a colony of 30,000 bats at Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge's 8 x 8-foot bat house. **Right:** Southeastern myotis cluster in the attic of the enormous bat house at the University of Florida.

on the university campus. The Hickory Mound Impoundment Unit of the Big Bend Wildlife Management Area in Taylor County also has a large bat house occupied by several thousand free-tailed bats.

Want to attract your own colony? You can do so with a backyard bat house, but for best results, make sure you follow current design and placement guidelines (see www.batcon.org for more information) before you build or buy one. Larger models with multiple roost chambers are much more successful than small, birdhouse-sized models. Most bat houses available in stores are simply not suitable for bats (they are often designed for customer tastes instead of bat needs). The best mounting sites for bat houses are buildings or free-standing poles with ample flight space around the front and sides; bat houses mounted on trees usually fail. As a bat "landlord," you'll be well-rewarded for your efforts – bats return year after year and



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Above: Brazilian free-tailed bats return to a pair of bat houses before dawn. These homemade houses shelter more than 500 bats. **Below:** The southeastern myotis roosts near water and feeds on aquatic insects such as mosquitoes. Caves and hollow trees are its favored haunts, although it also can be found in culverts and bat houses.



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pay their rent by eating large quantities of insects. A single bat can consume an estimated 600 insects per hour.

Bat-watching fun can continue long after dark. Many bat aficionados purchase an electronic gadget known as a bat detector, a device that converts a bat's ultrasonic, echolocation calls (think sonar) into audible "clicks" which humans can hear easily. A bat detector produces steady clicks when a bat is searching or navigating, while rapid clicks, known as "feeding buzzes," mean a bat has locked onto a meal. Some models can be used in conjunction with special software and a laptop computer, permitting scientists to identify individual species (which takes considerable practice).

Good bat-watching etiquette dictates keeping back from the roost itself, and speaking quietly so as not to disturb the bats. Don't shine a light on the roost or on the bats themselves, as this will delay the emergence. Just sit back with your favorite beverage and enjoy the show.

Due to Florida's warm climate, some bat species are active year-round, while others hibernate during winter. Brazilian free-tailed bats at the

University of Florida bat house put on a great performance most nights of the year, provided temperatures are warm enough for insects to fly. At large roosts, you might see predators like hawks, snakes or raccoons attempting to catch a bat in flight. Free-roaming and feral cats also prey on bats (another good reason to keep cats indoors!).

If you are willing to get up extra early, you might observe bats "swarming" en masse around their roost before re-entering. The reason behind this behavior is not exactly clear, but it certainly makes for great viewing. Swarming activity often takes place while it's still dark outside, but there may be enough light for you to see bats zip inside their home.


Don't forget to share your knowledge and appreciation for bats with friends and neighbors. Bats have come a long way in the public's eyes, but still suffer from "bad PR"; numerous colonies are destroyed each year out of ignorance and fear. Be a bat booster and help spread the good word about our beneficial bats. **FW**

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Big Bend WMA's Hickory Mound Bat House shelters a large colony of free-tailed bats.



Guidelines

Remember these guidelines when watching bats:

- Arrive 30 minutes before the expected time of the emergence.
- Keep your voice down while near the roost.
- Don't shine lights on the bats or the roost; avoid flash photography.
- Stay back from the roost (30 feet or more). This will keep you out of the bats' direct flight path.
- Never handle a bat, as it may bite in self-defense. If you find a bat on the ground, it is more likely than others to be sick. Contact a wildlife rehabilitator or a wildlife official promptly.