Controlling Bats

Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service

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CONTROLLING Bats

The bats common in this country average 3 to 5 inches in body length, with the wingspread averaging between 10 and 15 inches. Their bodies are covered with fur and the most common forms are some shade of brown.

Depending upon the species, mating may occur in the fall or sporadically throughout the winter. However, fertilization and development do not begin until spring. The young, usually one or two in number, are born in early summer after a gestation period thought to range from two to three months. No nest of any kind is provided and the young are carried by the mother until they are able to fly and shift for themselves.

Bats feed at night and occupy shelter in caves, hollow trees, attics, etc. in the daytime, hanging head down by means of the curved rigid claws on their hind feet. Some species migrate with the changing seasons and follow steady sources of food supply. Others hibernate during the colder months. Most species congregate in groups or colonies, some of which number in the tens of thousands or perhaps in the millions. When roosts occur in attics or partitions of occupied buildings, or in barns, they are usually highly objectionable because of the odor from the urine and droppings. The noise created by their crawling is annoying, and bats may harbor the bat bug Cimex pilosellus which closely resembles the bed bug. The odor of a roost is persistent and may serve to attract new colonies after the roost is broken up.

For centuries bats have been associated in legend with witchcraft and sorcery, and a fear of them has thus been instilled in humans. This fear is entirely unfounded, as bats are harmless. Bats do not attack humans nor, as commonly supposed, do they get themselves tangled in peoples' hair. Bats do, however, carry rabies, and any bat should be handled with extreme care.

Bats are not birds, as sometimes believed, but true flying mammals. Their "wings" are formed by a thin membrane connecting the greatly elongated forearm and fingers with the hind limbs and body. They are the only mammal thus equipped for flight. Unlike most nocturnal animals, bats have very small eyes. Nevertheless, even on the darkest nights, they can fly swiftly and unerringly through dense tree growths or other obstructions. This is possible because of their built-in "radar". Their high-pitched cries are reflected from solid objects, thus warning them of obstructions in their path. This speed and mobility of flight enables bats to feed upon night-flying insects which form the bulk of their food.
Bat Proofing. Bats are quite persistent and it is often difficult to dislodge them from old established roosts. The roost odor is also marked and will attract other bats. Thus, bat-proofing is essential in any bat control program.

Bats may enter buildings through unprotected louvers or vents, broken windows, or other open spaces. They may also enter through very small openings in old siding, or around eaves or cornices. The smaller species of bats can crawl through an opening as narrow as 3/8 of an inch, so a very careful inspection is necessary in order to close all possible entrances.

The larger openings should be covered with sheet metal or with 1/4-inch mesh hardware cloth if ventilation is desired. Narrow cracks can be plugged with oakum, tow, or similar packing material, and sealed with caulking compound. This will provide useful weather protection as well.

Be sure that all bats are out of the building before bat proofing work is completed. During the warmer months, when bats are active, all occupants normally leave the roost within 15 or 20 minutes after the first one starts out. If they have been disturbed, however, the normal routine may be upset and one or two of the most used openings should be temporarily left open. In the evening after the last bat has left for feeding, close the remaining openings. If a number of entrances have been used, wait two or three days before closing the last one, thus allowing all occupants to learn to enter through this last opening. It can then be easily located and closed. If any holes have been overlooked, the bats will soon find them, so it is necessary to watch the building closely at dusk for several evenings to find the entrances.

Poisoning. The use of poisoned bait is impractical since bats feed primarily upon flying insects.

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