



## NATURE AT RISK

By Carol Hillestad for the Brodhead Watershed Association

### Are Bats Flying Back from the Brink?

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“Flying” may be too strong. But Little Brown bats — whose numbers plummeted by 98 percent in recent years — just may be starting to recover.

A disease known as white-nose fungus has been causing them to wake from hibernation too early, leading to starvation and death — by the thousands. A colony near Easton once had 15,000 bats. A survey in 2018 found just eight.

The fungus is still around... but Little Brown bats (*Myotis lucifugus*) are adapting very quickly.

They’re choosing colder places to hibernate, which inhibits growth of the fungus. They’re even putting on more weight. Little Brown bats used to average about 7.5 grams. Now, researchers say the average is 10 grams. Some heavyweights even top 14 grams. Being heavier gives them more stored energy to survive if hibernation ends too early.

And bat survival matters to all of us, not just researchers (and the bats).

Bats are the only flying mammal in all the world. They play a hugely important role in pest control. By eating insects that stunt or damage crops, they are a boon to farmers and backyard growers. Fewer pests means less use of toxic pesticides that contaminate food, air, and our drinking water. And by eating mosquitoes that carry Zika, encephalitis, and heartworm, they help protect people and their pets.

A small colony of bats flitting through the night sky can consume 250,000 mosquitoes over the summer — making your backyard barbecue a less slap-happy place, as well.

It will be a long, long time before our native bats are back to full strength. You can help.

The best thing to do? Just leave them alone. Stay away from areas where they are known to hibernate. Put up a bat house to give them roosting places in summer. And if one finds its way into your house, don’t kill it. (It’s hard to do, makes a terrible mess, and gives the kids nightmares.) Turn on lights in the house and open a door to the night air. They will often find their way out. If not, contain it to one room by closing the doors. The bat will eventually roost, usually on a wall near the ceiling. Then cover it with a small cardboard box, slip a piece of cardboard underneath, take the whole contraption outside and take the cover off. (No need to cover your hair! Bats are no more interested in your hair than you are in theirs...)

Pennsylvania Game Commission has a very informative page about bats in general. Go to <https://www.pgc.pa.gov/Education/WildlifeNotesIndex/Pages/Bats.aspx> And for more amazing facts about bats, check out <https://www.doi.gov/blog/13-facts-about-bats#>

*For humans, bats, and every living thing, Brodhead Watershed Association protects water quality and quantity throughout our area. Get involved! Become a member! [www.brodheadwatershed.org](http://www.brodheadwatershed.org)*

