



NATURE AT RISK

By Carol Hillestad for the Brodhead Watershed Association

Why You Should Care About Bats

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Bats get a bad rap.

At Halloween, they're trotted out as scary decorations. People spread myths about them, like all bats are rabid, blind, blood feeding, flying rodents, and likely to fly into your hair.

No, no, no, no, and no!

Bats are actually amazing mammals with well-developed eyes that have zero interest in people's hair. There are 1,400 species of bats worldwide, and only three tiny ones — none in North America — feed on blood, mainly livestock and birds. And foxes and raccoons are far more likely to carry rabies than bats.

In fact, bats do a lot of good for human beings.

Just one of our native little brown bats (*myotis lucifugus*) typically eats thousands of mosquitos, moths, and beetles in an evening. That protects people from bites and stings, and protects your garden and local farm crops from being eaten by those insects!"potential offspring — millions of grubs and caterpillars. Bats are estimated to save farmers at least \$3.7 billion a year in pest control.

Alarmingly, populations of these useful, fascinating creatures have crashed by 90 percent since 2008, when the fungus that causes "white-nose syndrome" was found in Pennsylvania. Losing so many insect predators causes a cascade of problems — affecting forests, farms, and human health.

White-nose syndrome is believed to kill bats by increasing the amount of energy they use during winter hibernation. While hibernating, bats must ration how much energy they use, to survive without eating until spring. If they use up their limited energy reserves too quickly, many die.

Scientists are working to find solutions. In the meantime, you can help.

Avoid spreading the fungus — stay out of caves and abandoned mines where bats hibernate. Nature organizations have put barred gates on important bat caves — obey signs and don't enter these protected places.

Around your home, leave bats alone and don't disturb them. If a bat gets into the house, don't panic, and don't run for the broom. Close doors to other interior spaces, open windows and doors to the outside, and turn on all the lights. In most cases, the bat will find its way back outside. If it is exhausted, and roosts on a wall, cover the bat with a sturdy container and then slip a piece of stiff cardboard underneath as a lid. Take it outside and place on a ledge, bench or rock (to fly, bats need to start from a height). Remove the cardboard. And pat yourself on the back for doing a good deed!

For more information about little brown bats and other endangered bats:

<https://www.whitenosesyndrome.org/static-page/how-you-can-help>

<https://www.pgc.pa.gov/Education/WildlifeNotesIndex/Pages/Bats.aspx>



A researcher holds a little brown bat with the fungal disease white nose syndrome.