Bats of Wisconsin -- Creatures of the Night

Bats are mammals

Like most mammals, including people, bats have fur, grow up inside their moms, are born live, and nurse milk from their mothers' bodies. Bats belong to a special group of flying mammals called Chiroptera (Ki-ROP-ter-a). This word is Greek for "hand-wing." Bats actually fly with a modified hand.

Bats--the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth

Many people still fear and dislike these winged mammals of the night. Several hundred years ago in Europe, bats were considered evil, dirty, and mysterious. These feelings were passed on through legends.

Today we know that the many myths surrounding bats are false. But, because of these myths, some people still harm bats. In fact, because of human actions, many species have become endangered. Bats play a valuable role in the ecosystem. Worldwide, bats are the most important natural enemies of night-flying insects. In the tropics, bats pollinate flowers and disperse seeds.

The Mega and the Micro

Bats are divided into two main groups, the mega-chiroptera and the micro-chiroptera. The mega-bats, about 150 species, are called fruit bats because many of them eat fruit, nectar, and pollen. They are also called flying foxes because they have big eyes for finding food and they have a face that looks somewhat like a fox.

The micro-bats, all 800 species, are insect eaters. They navigate and hunt by a system called echolocation (EK-oh-lo-Kay-shun). All Wisconsin bats are from this group. Find out more about the 7 Wisconsin bats.

Hello...hello...hello....Echolocation

Although most bats have good daytime vision, insect-eaters depend on their unique bat sonar system during the hours of darkness. This system, called echolocation, helps the bat locate and catch its prey. The bat sends out a steady signal of very short, high-pitched sounds that we can't hear. It scans the area, turning its head from side to side, sending out sound pulses through its mouth. The sounds bounce off objects and return to the bat as echoes.
As the bat gets closer to an insect, it sends out more squeaks. These sounds continue to bounce back to the bat’s large, sensitive ears until it can tell exactly where the insect is located. Once a bat has zeroed in on its prey, it uses its wings to scoop up the insect.

**Do Not Disturb**

Many species of bats roost together in large groups (colonies). For some species, there are only a few roosts for all of the individuals of that species. This means that large numbers of a species are vulnerable to the same catastrophe.

Some Wisconsin bat species migrate south for the winter, others hibernate. During the summer, bats store up fat for the winter. When Wisconsin’s weather turns cold, bats look for a place to hibernate until spring. During hibernation, they use their stored energy very slowly. If bats are disturbed, they must use precious energy to warm up, become alert, and search for a new hibernation site. This can cause a bat to use 10 to 30 days worth of fat in a few minutes. If they are disturbed too many times, they run out of stored energy and starve before spring. If you know of a place where bats are hibernating, please don’t disturb.

**Fun Fact**

A single little brown bat can catch 600 mosquitoes in just one hour.

**Wisconsin Bats**

Wisconsin has seven species of bats. Here’s the rundown.

**Little Brown Bat**

*Myotis lucifugus*

This species is the most common *Myotis* species in the northern two-thirds of the United States. Frequently found in tree hollows and buildings during the summer, it often roosts with big brown bats. It is most likely found near rivers, lakes, or marshes. In winter, it flies to the nearest suitable cave or abandoned mine to hibernate.
Northern Myotis  
(*Myotis septentrionalis*)

This species is similar in appearance to the little brown bat although its hair is somewhat duller. Not as abundant in Wisconsin as the little brown bat, the northern myotis prefers abandoned mines and small caves.

Big Brown Bat  
(*Eptesicus fuscus*)

This is one of the most common and widespread species of bats in North America. It roosts in colonies in tree hollows, wall spaces, and buildings. More tolerant of cold conditions than other Wisconsin bats, it is the only one that commonly overwinters in walls and attics. It also hibernates in caves and abandoned mines. It ranges in color from pale brown to dark brown with a black wing membrane.

Silver-Haired Bat  
(*Lasionycteris noctivigans*)

This bat gets its name from its black to dark brown fur frosted with silver on the back. It lives in wooded areas of the U.S. and Canada and migrates south to central and southern states where it hibernates in rock crevices and tree hollows. It feeds in forest openings and along forest edges.

Red Bat  
(*Lasiurus borealis*)

The red bat is a solitary species found most often in deciduous tree foliage during the summer. It migrates south to the central and southern states where it probably hibernates in tree hollows. The red bat has fine, silky red-orange to yellowish fur. It is often overlooked because it can appear, at quick glance, to be a dead leaf. They are rarely seen far from forested areas, and moths are their favorite food.
Hoary Bat  
(*Lasiurus cinereus*)

One of the largest bats in the United States and the most widely distributed, this species has dark yellowish fur tipped with white. It is more common in the prairie states than in the eastern U.S. It roosts in tree foliage, mostly in evergreens. Like the red bat, it eats moths. Northern populations may migrate considerable distances to subtropical areas when the weather gets cold.

Eastern Pipistrelle  
(*Pipistrellus subflavus*)

This is Wisconsin's smallest bat with a body of 3 inches or less and a wingspan rarely exceeding 7 inches. Pips, as they are called, emerge earlier in the evening than most other bats and have a rather slow erratic flight pattern. They're found in wooded areas.

Keen's Bat  
(*Myotis Keenii*)

Similar in size and appearance to the little brown bat, except that its ears extend beyond its nose when its ears are flattened forward against the head. Found throughout Wisconsin, but more common in northern counties. Forms colonies: hibernates.

Indiana Bat  
(*Myotis sodalis*)