

Emily Sexson – Education Specialist- 04/03/17 – Bat Appreciation Week

Na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na Bat Week! While this may send images of Adam West or another infamous Batman flying through your mind, Bat Appreciation Week celebrates our world's non-fiction bats, and with over 1,200 species, there's plenty to celebrate! Bat appreciation week is the first full week of April as this is the time of year that bats that hibernate begin to emerge. From the smallest bumblebee bat, weighing less than two grams, to the giant golden-crowned flying fox with a wingspan measuring over five feet in length, bats provide essential services to our planet!

Many people view bats as pests, but in reality, our world needs them. There are many myths surrounding the planet's only flying mammals. Some fear that they'll attack or nest in your hair or that they want to suck your blood, or many other falsehoods. These myths have created a bad reputation that bats don't deserve. The truth is bats will steer clear of humans and other threats and have no desire to be in anyone's hair. Out of the thousands of species, only three eat blood. Vampire bats which are found in the tropics of Mexico, Central and South America, generally consume the blood of sleeping cattle or horses. With sharp teeth, a quick nip usually goes unnoticed by the sleeping animals. While they don't turn anything into a vampire, their saliva does have a special anticoagulant property that keeps blood from clotting, making it easier for them to drink. Doctors have studied vampire bats and created medicine called Draculin for heart and stroke patients to use.

You may have heard the expression "blind as a bat". This may have derived from some bats ability to use echolocation. Bats emit a high pitch sound that resonates and bounces off of objects around them, this echolocation helps bats pinpoint the exact location of insects and grab dinner on the go. People may assume because bats use echolocation that their sense of sight isn't very good. However, most bats have much better vision than humans do and see incredibly well both day and night. Little brown bats, which are common in Kansas, can use their echolocation to eat over 1,000 mosquitoes in a single hour. In the United States, bats are estimated to be worth more than \$3.7 billion

a year in reduced crop damage and pesticide use.

Not all bats help us by taking care of pests; others are essential pollinators and seed dispersers. Fruit bats, such as the largest species of bat, the flying fox, eat fruit as well as pollen and nectar. Fruit bats act similar to other flying pollinators such as bees and butterflies. They transfer pollen from one plant to another ensuring the plant's life cycle is fulfilled, and seeds are produced. Eating fruit allows them to transfer seeds from one area to another through emission. Bat dung or guano is also beneficial; it is an excellent fertilizer that provides a major natural resource with significant economic benefits for communities when collected responsibly.

Despite the critical role bats play in our ecosystems, over 26 species are critically endangered facing an imminent risk of extinction, 51 species are listed as endangered, and 954 species are considered vulnerable to endangerment. Threats to bats come from all directions including deadly fungus and predation, but the number one threat to bats is habitat destruction caused by people. Many bats are inhumanely displaced from their roosting areas out of fear or lack of education while others simply have nowhere to land due to destruction of their habitat for human gain.

Bats are often misunderstood or feared, but our planet depends on them for pest control as well as their pollination and seed dispersal abilities. Bat Appreciation Week is a great time to start giving bats the respect they deserve. You can do this by purchasing products made from sustainable resources. Keep an eye out for a small green frog on packaging; this symbol lets consumers know the business their money is going to supports the Rainforest Alliance, an organization dedicated to conserving biodiversity by ensuring sustainable practices. Another simple way to help bats is to buy or build a bat house to put on the side of your own home or in your yard. Bat houses are small narrow structures that provide a safe area to roost away from predators. Every day is a day we can celebrate bats, but when the mosquitos start to bite, thank a bat that it was only one or two, not a couple thousand!