

Conservation Corner

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November 4, 2015

Another Halloween has come and gone. While most of the ghosts, goblins, and witches have been stored in the closet until next year, I'll save one character for this week's topic. They are perhaps the least understood and most misrepresented of all Iowan mammals. They play an important role in insect control, pollination, and seed dispersal. While closing down our parks last week, one was found in the shower house at Cooper's Cove. I'm sure by now you've guessed this traditional symbol of the night is the bat, the only true flying mammal.

Bats are members of the order Chiroptera, which is Greek for "winged hand." It is the second largest order of mammals, second only to Rodentia, with over 1,000 species worldwide. Iowa is home to nine bat species, all members of the Family Vespertilionidae and all insect eaters. Here in Pocahontas County, our most common bat neighbors include the Little Brown Bat and the Big Brown Bat.

Did you know one Little Brown Bat may capture up to 1,200 tiny insects, including mosquitoes, in a single hour? The Big Brown Bat, meanwhile, feeds on moths and beetles that are serious agricultural pests. And while none of Iowa's bats are nectar feeders, many tropical species play important roles as pollinators.

Bats are amazing creatures of the night, using echolocation to locate flying prey and hunt on the wing. Perhaps you've seen bats foraging in the summer twilight hours along streams or woodland edges or in town under the street lights. Most Iowan bats migrate south for the winter or hibernate in caves in Eastern Iowa. Only the Big Brown bat is known to overwinter in buildings. Perhaps you've heard of White-Nose Syndrome, a disease of hibernating bats, that is spreading across the country and killing bats by the millions.

Another threat to bats is wind turbines. Scientists estimate 200,000 to 800,000 bats are killed each year by the spinning blades, but they don't know why. Can't bats detect the turbines? Are bats somehow attracted to the turbines? Most importantly, how can bats be deterred and protected within wind farms?

To better understand bats and the ecological role they play as well as the threats facing them from disease, climate change, habitat loss, and wind energy development, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has created the North American Bat Monitoring Program. Over the next five years, volunteers from 31 states and 10 Canadian provinces will be conducting acoustic monitoring surveys, winter hibernating bat counts, and summer maternity colony counts to help provide researchers with valuable information on declining bat populations.

Here in Iowa, road and walking transects are being established in central, eastern, and southern counties to identify areas of high bat activity. If you would like to participate, check out Iowa's Wildlife, White-Nose Bat Syndrome, at the Iowa DNR website.

Remember, all bats in Iowa are protected. Surely humans and bats can live together peacefully. After all, bats represent far more than just Halloween décor.