



A large flight of bats from a bachelor group coming out at dusk in the San Luis Valley. (Photo courtesy of Colorado Parks and Wildlife)

## Learning about – and appreciating – bats

My wife and I were sitting in the backyard, enjoying a couple of sun-downers, a glass of man’s best friend, and watching the sun disappear under the western horizon.

The orange glow began to fade and that time known as twilight began to come into a fuzzy sort of focus. All the night animals began stirring.

About that time, a dozen black shapes began flying through the air, like a squadron of tiny fighter jets. “What kind of birds are those?” my wife asked.

“Those aren’t birds. They are bats, coming out to feed,” I replied.

With that, she covered her long blonde hair, tucked and ran for the house. She ran so fast, her glass hung in mid-air long after she hit the back door of the house. My wife had displayed the common reaction when someone sees a bat.

I always enjoy watching people’s reaction to the mention of specific animals as certain animals always trigger a prescribed response. Snakes, for example, set some folks off. Mention a snake and some people start high stepping and back peddling for



### Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

parts unknown. Mice will make people jump up on tables or chairs.

For some reason, people think bats will fly into their hair and become hopelessly entangled, my wife being of those people. In reality, it is a myth because bats have no interest in flying into your hair.

Bats fly low over the heads of people who are outside during the late evening. Bats are equipped with a built in sonar system that allows them to navigate at fighter jet speeds through total darkness. The bats are simply searching for insects to feed upon and again, have no interest in your hair.

There are 18 species of bats that call Western Colorado home. I won’t list all of them, but if you want to be able to identify all 18

types, Colorado Parks and Wildlife has a handy guide called Bats of the Rocky Mountain West.

The three types of bats you are most likely to see on the Western Slope are the big brown bat, the silver haired bat and the Townsend’s big-eared bat. The big brown bat is the most commonly seen bat in Colorado and is found just about everywhere.

They especially like to live near towns and are year-round residents but are also common among forested areas lower than 10,000 feet in altitude.

The big brown bat is the one that usually has an association with human beings.

These bats are the ones who will take up residency in your attics. These bats will also make rock crevices their home, along with caves and mine shafts. These are the same places big brown bats will hole up and hibernate for the winter.

It is a fairly large sized bat, having a wingspan of up to 16 inches and weighing in at nearly three-quarters of an ounce. Hard to imagine a creature so small can instill so much fear in a person.

Big brown bats have rounded ears and long

powerful wings. They are a russet color and often a chocolate brown to almost black in color. Amazingly, their life span in the wild can approach 20 years.

Like most bats, the big brown bat feeds primarily on insects. They eat a variety of flying insects like mosquitoes. Beetles are also a favored food of bats. A bat can consume 150 mosquitoes in 15 minutes, and I say, keep up the good work.

One interesting feature of the big brown bat is their homing ability, similar to that of homing pigeons. Studies of the big brown bat have shown they can return to its roost site from distances of up to 40 miles in a single night.

The silver haired bat is a solitary creature, sometimes found in pairs. These critters will usually be found in open buildings, under eaves or in trees, preferring to stay away from closed spaces like attics. This bat does not like Colorado winters and often migrates to warmer areas to the south.

The third bat you are most likely to encounter would be the largest of the three, the Townsend’s big-

eared bat, who reaches an inch and a half in length. They can be found in mines, caves and structures in wooded areas to elevations above 9,500 feet.

The big-eared bat hibernates here in Colorado from October to April. They will hang singly or in small clusters in places where temperatures are fairly stable ranging from 32 degrees to 52 degrees.

Bats are a remarkable mammal, with more than 1,400 species found worldwide. Bats can be found everywhere on the planet, from the polar regions to the driest deserts.

They have very few natural predators, with disease being their biggest enemy. All bats are important to the ecosystem because they pollinate plants and crops.

The downside to bats is their ability to carry rabies. Bats are ranked No. 3 in the United States as main hosts for the disease, behind raccoons and skunks. In Colorado, bats have been the primary rabies host for over 20 years. Between the years of 1977 to 1996, 685 of the 697 animals tested for rabies were bats.

Bats are an animal best

enjoyed from a distance. You should never try to handle one unless you want to be bitten. If you see one during the day, it may be sick or injured, and best not be handled.

If you encounter bats under the eaves of your house or in a tree in your yard, it is normal. It is best not to disturb them. Just leave bats alone and usually they will leave on their own.

When the bats come out on those summer evenings, I usually have to watch their aerial acrobatics alone as I can’t convince my wife they are not out to get her. She misses a pretty good show when she stays inside.

*Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press and avid hunter who travels across North and South America in search of adventure and serves as a director for the Montrose County Sheriff’s Posse. For information about the posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org*

*For outdoors or survival related questions or comments, feel free to contact him directly at his email elkhunter77@icloud.com*



10 SOUTH SELIG AVE MONTROSE, COLORADO 81401 970-249-4226