

## **Bats – The Good, The Bad and The Ugly**

According to the Lake County Health Department/Community Health Center, nine bats tested positive for rabies in Lake County in 2008. In total, over 200 Lake County bats were submitted to the state laboratory for testing. Four percent of those bats tested positive, which remained in line with the statewide prevalence of 3.8 percent of bats testing positive in 2008.

Seventeen of the 34 bats that tested positive for rabies between 2000 and 2008 were found in the northwestern area of Lake County. While it is important that all residents continue to report suspicious bats, the Health Department asks that residents in the NW portion of the county be especially mindful and continue to practice safety measures around bats. Additionally, all rabies positive bats from 2000 to 2008 were collected during the months of May through October, with the majority of positive bats occurring in July and August.

The residents of Lake County play a vital role in keeping their communities and pets safe by notifying the Health Department about suspect bats and keeping their pets' vaccinations current, according to the law.

As we enter the time of year when bats are most active and when most bat exposures take place in Illinois, this is a good time to brush up on bats – the good, the bad and the ugly.

Often when people think of bats, they believe myths that are untrue about bats, their habits and their role in our ecosystem. For example, bats are not blind, they will not try to

get tangled in your hair and they will not suck your blood. Confusion and misinformation surrounds this unique animal. It's important for parents to be aware of the facts about bats so they can help their children understand these creatures.

### **The Good**

Although sometimes a little scary to look at, bats are beneficial animals. Some species can eat up to 600 insects in an hour – just think of how many insects bats eat each night! Besides mosquitoes, bats eat crop-destroying pests, like moths and grasshoppers. In fact, bats are the only major predators of night flying insects. Not only does this help keep us comfortable and free of bug bites, bats are also especially helpful to farmers because they help reduce the need for chemical pesticides. This helps keep our produce fresh and free of excess chemicals.

Many species of bats help spread seeds and pollinate certain plants, especially in desert and tropical climates. This is a very important role for bats, as they help keep forests growing and help trees produce fruits. Bats are also the world's only flying mammals!

### **The Bad**

Bats make their home (called a roost) in a variety of small, dark and sheltered places, which means they can often find their way into chimneys, gutters and basements, causing quite a surprise for anyone who finds a bat has made its home in their home.

The Health Department can refer callers to bat exclusion companies and provide information on methods for excluding bats. Bats can be excluded from living quarters by

covering chimneys, attics and vents with half-inch hardware cloth screens and by installing draft guards beneath doors, windows and plumbing. Bats potentially can enter holes as small as 3/4" in diameter. They do not chew insulation or otherwise make new holes. Their entries must be covered or plugged. For small crevices, silicone caulking may help.

If a large bat colony must be evicted from a wall or attic, careful observation should be made at dusk to find entry holes (also sometimes recognizable by stains around used holes and crevices or by droppings beneath). The holes should be plugged after the bats emerge to feed (which they do during evening hours).

### **The Ugly**

In Lake County, bats are the only animals that have tested positive for rabies over the past ten years. Rabies is a highly infectious and fatal viral disease that affects the nervous system of humans and other mammals. Most commonly, people get rabies from the bite of a rabid animal. In some cases, people can contract rabies when infected material from a rabid animal (such as saliva) comes in contact with one's nose, mouth, open wound or eyes. It takes between five days to more than one year before symptoms of rabies appear.

Parents should make sure children know that they should never touch a bat, including those lying on the ground. They may not be dead, just ill, and could bite. If a bat is discovered in a house or bedroom, medical consultation should be obtained immediately, as human contact cannot be ruled out. Teach your children that bats, like any wild animal, should be left alone. It is important to remember that you should never hold a bat

barehanded. Pet owners should be on alert for bats near their homes, because pets that spend time outdoors can easily come into contact with these animals. If a rabid animal bites a pet, the pet may, in turn, develop the disease and then transmit rabies to a person or other pets. This is just one reason why it's important to vaccinate pet dogs and cats.

The Health Department is urging anyone who has been in direct contact with a bat or notices a bat acting in an unusual manner, such as flying in daylight or lying on the ground or in your home, to contact the Health Department at (847) 949-9925. If the bat is inside your house, do not chase it away because it may be needed for rabies testing. Close the doors and keep people away from the room where the bat is located. Trained animal wardens will remove the bat at no cost to the resident or refer the caller to the appropriate jurisdiction. Health officials are urging residents to avoid touching, hitting or destroying bats. When dead bats are submitted to state labs for rabies testing, they need to be in good condition. Heavily damaged bats cannot be tested.

So during this active time for bats, it's important to remember the good, bad and ugly facts associated with bats. The things you've learned will help keep your family safe. And remember, bats help control insect populations and keep forests growing! If you have questions about bats, please contact the Lake County Health Department Animal Care and Control Program at (847) 949-9925.