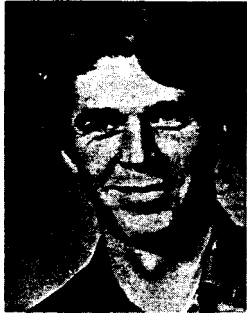


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Natural History Notes

MIKE DOMBECK grew up in the Moose Lake area, attended Hayward schools, UW-Stevens Point, University of Minnesota and Iowa State University. He has a Ph. D. in Aquatic Biology. Mike has worked as an area fishing guide, taught Zoology at UW-Stevens Point, and is a fisheries biologist with the USDA Forest Service, living in Petaluma, California.

THE BAT



Hoary Bat

The bat is a relatively common yet mysterious animal. It is one of those mainly harmless and helpful creatures that strikes terror into the hearts of otherwise rational people. The bat is a mammal and thus shares certain characteristics common to man. These are the possession of hair or fur, bearing of live young, and the production of milk to feed these young. Bats have what is considered to be the finest fur of all mammals. The bat is the only true flying mammal.

Bats inhabit most of the temperate and tropical regions of the world. The only mammals more numerous are the rodents. There are over 1,000 different species of bats world-wide. Seven bat species inhabit Wisconsin, and all are insect eaters. The hoary bat is the largest: it grows to six inches long and a weight up to 1-1/4 ounces. The smallest is the eastern pipistrelle which grows to about three inches long and weighs 1/8 to 1/4 ounce. Bats belong to the order *Chiroptera*, meaning flying hand. The wings of the bat are one of their most interesting and distinctive features. They are naked and nearly transparent and consist of a double membrane that can be stretched along elongated fingers. The fingers stretch the wing membrane during flight and pull it together at rest. The wing membrane is especially tough, and is reportedly three times more resistant to puncture than a surgical glove and only 1/5th the thickness.

In the temperate zones some bat species migrate south for the winter while others hibernate,

and some even migrate to hibernating places such as caves. Some traditional hibernating or roosting caves may have hundreds of thousands of individuals. Bats are easily roused from their hibernation and on mild winter days they may venture out to feed. In spring, the pink and naked baby bats are born. Most are able to fly in about three weeks and are mature in a few months. However, most females don't bear young until their second year.

The various bat species eat a wide variety of things. Most feed entirely on insects while other species eat fruit, nuts, pollen or nectar. There are a few types of carnivorous bats that will eat small animals such as mice, frogs and lizards, and some that even catch small fish. And, of course, there are the vampire bats that feed on blood. They bite large mammals, mostly cattle, on the backs and drink the blood as it drains from the wound.

Most bats possess a "sixth sense" - echolocation. Similar to radar, echolocation is the ability to navigate and locate objects in the dark. While flying bats emit a continuous series of sounds through their nose or open mouth. These sounds bounce off objects and are picked up by the bat's complex ears. The ear muscles relax and contract in synchrony with the sounds emitted. This blocks the bat's sounds but allows the echoes to be picked up. From this the bat can determine the location, size, density, and movement of the object. Echolocation enables the bat to fly and hunt in darkness, safe from most predators.

Rarely is there a horror movie without bats flying about in the dead of night. Because of their ability to fly in the dark, bats are associated with witchcraft, evil spirits, and black magic. Because of echolocation, bats have the ability to fly in the dark while most birds do not. Bats are also the source of many myths. They do not cure blindness or pull hair. In truth, bats help maintain balance in nature and eat millions of insects. They do much less harm to the environment than a can of insect repellent.



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