

Are Bats A Health Concern?

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

One of the many things that K-State Research and Extension is responsible for in Kansas is some of the wildlife damage control. In many other states it is a state agency. One of the differences in how Kansas has approached it is that we try to use it as an opportunity to teach why the problem occurs and focus first on non-lethal ways to manage it. But it also means that Extension Offices receive a lot of calls on wildlife in general.

It should come as no surprise that given the last 12 months of coronavirus and Covid-19, and the possible ties to the virus originating in bats (which has not been confirmed yet, just suspected) the number of calls that I've received on bats has been up! This is also not a surprise. People have been home more over the past year, many people are working outside in their lawn and garden more, they have been made more aware of bats due to lots of press coverage, so people are going to be more aware of and more sensitive to the presence of bats.

First of all, yes, we do have bats here in Kansas and far more than most people realize. State-wide we have over a dozen bat species but most of what we are going to encounter is the Big Brown Bat or occasionally the Red Bat. Big Brown Bats form loose colonies and what are likely to be encountered in your attic or flying around outside at night. Red Bats, which are quite pretty by the way, are solitary and rest in trees. Other species of bats will migrate through or be encountered occasionally.

Bats are extremely beneficial. They are insectivores so they eat insects. Lots and lots of insects, including mosquitoes. People frequently talk about Purple Martins eating mosquitoes. While Purple Martins do eat insects they eat very few mosquitoes as they are feeding higher in the air than most mosquitoes fly and are active from sunup to sundown. Purple Martins are going to sleep for the night just about the time that mosquitoes are getting active. Bats feed lower to the ground and all night long. So it is important that we keep bats around!

Getting back to the question at hand, are bats a health concern? Yes and no. Like any wildlife, handling bats is not advisable. They do bite and their bite COULD transmit rabies, though the rate of rabies infestation in bats is highly overstated. Skunks are honestly a bigger problem for rabies. But remember that the most common way any creature contracts rabies is through the saliva of an infected animal that bites a person or another animal. Aerial transmission (virus in the air that is inhaled) of rabies is very very rare.

Zoonotic diseases, those that are passed from an animal to people occur but not regularly. Many wildlife species harbor many viruses. Researchers are still finding new viruses every year in many different species including bats. Most of these, at the present time, do not crossover between species. But all viruses mutate and one never knows when a mutation will allow a virus to make the jump from critter to human and thereby become zoonotic.

The biggest threat is more people on the earth with rising temperatures and humans intruding into areas with lots of wildlife that may not have had much interaction with humans before. Our Kansas bat species have been living close to humans for a century or two now. I'm not too worried about something making the leap. But I also don't go around handling bats on a regular basis (or skunks or opossums or raccoons, etc.) If you have bats in your attic, then there are companies that can remove them and exclude them. Otherwise, I'm not overly worried about the bats we have in our community!