

California bats get public housing

NATALIE JACEWICZ 4:15 p.m. PST November 5, 2015



(Photo: Natalie Jacewicz/The Salinas Californian)

House-hunting Californians often curse the competitive real estate market. Bats have to agree.

For bats, “the biggest challenge in California is urbanization,” said Dave Johnston, a bat biologist for the environmental consultancy H.T. Harvey and Associates. Urban sprawl, he said, slashes bat habitat and shrivels the number of quality roosts.

On Halloween, California teachers – many decked in cobwebbed vests and bat broaches – joined biologists in Monterey at the 45th annual conference of the North American Society for Bat Research. Their mission? To set a new world record for bat houses built in a day. Bat sympathizers across the country grabbed hammers and wood and began the noisy business of building 5,000 bat houses, one nail at a time.

In the eyes of biologists, bats are the Byronic heroes of the animal kingdom. Shahroukh Mistry, who cohosted the conference with Johnston, says the winged mammals are greatly misunderstood.

“The first thing that comes to people’s minds when they think of bats is rabies,” Mistry said. “But the actual incidence of rabies is way less than one percent.”

He suggested that bat populations offer a valuable chance to understand the human physiological reaction to rabies.

“There’s a lot to learn from bats about how they deal with the rabies virus and why our immune system has a hard time doing so,” he said.

Rob Mies, executive director of the Organization for Bat Conservation, emphasized the importance of bats to agriculture.

“These bats eat a couple of thousand insects every night,” he said as he held up a native big brown bat, *Eptesicus fuscus*, about the size of a fuzzy jalapeno pepper. Beetles that blight crops rank high on bats’ list of favorite dishes, he noted.

The teachers constructed dream houses for big brown bats raising pups. About a foot wide and a few inches deep, the houses resemble wooden postboxes and can be mounted on poles or the sides of buildings.

“It’s like Ikea!” one teacher said as she began assembly.

“But not as hard,” said bat biologist Mies, handing her a nail.

Green plastic mesh inside the houses offers a place for the bats to hang by their toenails. Mistry said the real estate must-haves are simple:

“Bats like it snug, and they like it warm.”

Depending on the location, a paint job may hike a bat house’s value. Darker painting absorbs the sun’s heat and makes a warmer house. Johnston explained that temperature determines whether a bat house is pup-proofed, since young bats need homes that stay 85-105 degrees warm. For bats that have only one baby a year, every detail maximizing pup survival matters.

Fifth-grade teacher Shelley Gorin of La Hoya Elementary School in Salinas had high hopes for her bat house.

“I’m going to see if I can hang this up at school,” she said over the pounding of hammers. She explained that the furry aviators provide a helpful illustration of the distinction between mammals and birds.

There are many more lessons that bats can teach if they stick around, according to scientists. Outside of the conference, Mistry is working on a bat condo complex, and Johnston works on a number of projects to increase bat housing.

Though bats and farmers share many insect enemies, farms that rely heavily on pesticides threaten bats, according to Johnson. But by minimizing pesticide use and planting trees, farmers can make fast friends of nature’s pest control.

“As we get more and more crowded, we’ve got to rethink ways we cohabit with wildlife,” Johnston said. “We need bats more than most people realize ... so that our entire environment has some balance to it.”

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