

Bats-- Winged Wonders – February 2021

I cover a lot of topic areas in my role as the Agriculture and Natural Resources Extension Agent for Camden County, but one of my favorite topics will always be wildlife – especially misunderstood wildlife which, quite honestly, is most of it. As such, my topic today is bats.

Bats play a vital role in the ecosystem reducing pest insect populations, offering pollination services, and decreasing crop damage. These services save Americans around \$3.7 billion dollars per year. Bats eat 50-100% of their body weight in insects each night. A single bat can eat hundreds of mosquitos each hour. Though not all bats eat insects, all 16 species in Georgia do.

There are more than 1400 species of bats across six continents, making it the second largest order of mammals behind rodents. I often hear people refer to bats as flying rats. Interestingly, bats are more closely related to humans and primates than they are to rodents. Whereas rodents live roughly 1-3 years, bats can live 20-30 years or more. They have 1-2 pups at a time which can weigh up to 1/3 of the mother's body weight. Think about that a minute. That's equivalent to a 120lb woman having a 40lb baby!

About half of Georgia's bat species are listed as threatened or endangered due to habitat loss. Development and highly manicured landscapes with a lack of native plants are major contributors to habitat loss. Insecticides and outdoor cats also rank among their biggest threats. Though most pet owners that let their cats roam outside wouldn't think they'd have a major impact on bat populations, they do. Outdoor cats act as invasive predator and have a large impact on native populations of bats, songbirds, reptiles, amphibians, and small mammals. They have been the primary cause of the extinction of roughly a dozen species globally, and for that reason outdoor cats are illegal in a growing number of states and countries. White nose syndrome is another major threat to bat populations, killing millions of bats and putting several species at risk for extinction. White nose syndrome is caused by a fungus that affects bats during hibernation by irritating them awake causing them to burn needed fat reserves and hunt for food before any is available on the landscape. Many bats freeze or starve to death, and death rates in infected colonies can be as high as 90-100%.

So how can we help bats? If you're interested in attracting more bats to your landscape, or just helping to supply more habitat for bats there are a number of actions that you can take to make a difference. Plant native plants including flowers that differ in fragrance, color and shape – as well as light-colored flowers that attract insects at dusk. Remember native plants are the base of the local food chain and non-native plants don't offer the same nutritional and habitat resources. Avoid using insecticides in your landscape to provide a safe space for bats to feed and rest. Keep cats indoors and avoid unnecessary artificial lighting. Provide a variety of vegetation and leave dead trees in the landscape when possible to safely do so. Many of our local species of bats roost in hollow trees, crevices, under loose bark or branches, and in Spanish moss.

For more information on bats, feel free to reach out to me or check out the great resources available on bats from Georgia DNR, Bat Conservation International or the National Park Service for credible information.