BATS AND THE CAMP COMMUNITY

Compiled by the Maine Youth Camping Association - February 2006

Are there reasons for conserving bats?

Most bats are valuable allies, well worth protecting. In the United States, little brown bats often eat mosquitoes and can catch up to 1,200 tiny insects in an hour. Yet, they rank as North America's most rapidly declining and endangered land mammals. The largest known cause of decline is exaggerated human fear and persecution. Excellent bat education materials for campers are available at batcon.org.

Should bats be tolerated or encouraged in our neighborhoods & camps?

There are clear benefits to sharing our locale with bats, but as with any wild animal, they never should be tolerated inside our living quarters. **Most bats that enter living areas are lost youngsters with no greater interest than a safe escape.** They can be allowed out through an open door or window or caught in a butterfly net, a leather gloved hand, or a coffee can slowly placed over them while a piece of cardboard is slid between the bat and wall. Captured bats can be then safely released outside, away from people, preferably at night. Rabies testing is expensive and unnecessary unless a possible rabies exposure has occurred.

In most cases, exclusion of bats from human living quarters is simple, inexpensive, and can be accomplished by the homeowner with minimal instruction. When bats must be entirely excluded from a building, providing an adequate-sized bat house nearby can resolve a nuisance without sending it to a neighbor. Without this alternative, evicted bats will attempt to move into a neighboring building, or sicken and die, increasing the probability of being picked up by children or pets. (See page 2 for bat house info).

Are there risks of people overreacting to news of rabies in bats?

Rabies incidents involving bats are often distorted by media reporting. When risks are not kept in perspective, panicked people overreact in ways that actually increase the risk of rabies. Attempts to poison or exclude bats from buildings by inappropriate methods can dramatically increase human contact, as sick or homeless bats scatter to throughout an entire neighborhood. The public needs to recognize the inescapability and desirability of coexisting with bats, as well as how to minimize contact and associated risks.

How dangerous are bats?

Most bats are healthy and contribute to our environment in many ways, particularly by consuming insect pests. Less than .05% (1 out of 2200) of bats randomly sampled are positive for the rabies virus. Rabid bats rarely attack humans. But because rabies can occur anywhere and because rabies can be fatal, any direct contact with bats should be strictly avoided. Block holes & possible entry points in camp buildings before your season begins.

False information about bats abounds. Bats are not blind. They are neither rodents nor birds. They will not suck your blood, or get tangled in your hair. The best protection we can offer these unique mammals is to learn more about their habits and recognize the value of living safely with them.

Statistically speaking, pets, playground equipment, and sports are far more dangerous than bats. Bat rabies accounts for approximately one human death per year in the United States. Dogs attack and kill more humans annually than die from bat rabies in a decade. Clearly, bats do not rank very high among mortality threats to humans. Nevertheless, prudence and simple precautions can save lives.

What is rabies & how is it transmitted?

Rabies is an infectious viral disease that invades the central nervous system of humans and other warm-blooded animals. Rabies is nearly always transmitted by a bite. Careless handling is the primary source of rabies exposure from bats.

Rabies causes fatal inflammation of the brain or spinal cord. Symptoms usually develop about 10 days to seven months after infection, and death follows 2-12 days after symptoms appear. Early symptoms in humans include pain, burning, and numbness at the site of infection. Victims complain of headaches, inability to sleep, irritability, muscle spasms of the throat and difficulty swallowing. Convulsions may occur, followed by unconsciousness and death.

What can be done to prevent rabies transmission to humans?

By far the most important prevention is dog and cat vaccination, as pets often find sick or dying bats. Also, children should be especially warned never to handle any unfamiliar animal. Explain that wild animals that can be touched may be rabid and dangerous. Ninety to 95% of sick bats are not rabid, but taking a careless chance on being bitten could prove fatal. Any animal bite should be reported immediately to a family physician or public health professional for evaluation as a possible rabies exposure.

What is the recommended treatment for a known or suspected rabies exposure?

Rabies treatment today bears little resemblance to that of many years ago; it is highly effective and relatively painless. Post-exposure rabies prophylaxis should begin as soon after exposure as possible. When questioning about possible exposure, it is essential first to calm fears of

painful shots. For the majority of patients, the post-exposure shots are less painful than tetanus vaccinations.

Vaccinations are administered on days 0, 7, and 21 or 28. For those at continued risk of exposure to rabies, a booster dose of vaccine or serology may be necessary at intervals of 6 months to 2 years.

How should potential exposures to rabid bats be evaluated and treated?

Any bat that bites a human should be tested for rabies by the **Maine Health & Environmental Testing Lab** as soon as possible, and post-exposure treatment should begin immediately unless the bat is confirmed negative. Bat bites are typically felt and detected at the time. Visual examination for bite marks is unreliable.

If a lost or sick bat hides in bedding, it could be inadvertently pinched during one's sleep, bite, and leave without detection. If a young child or a mentally incapacitated person is found alone with a bat in the same room and the possibility of a bite cannot be eliminated, post-exposure treatment should be considered unless prompt testing of the bat can rule out infection. Also, persons who wake up with a bat in the same room where they have been sleeping are advised to submit it for testing, especially if the bat is unable to fly or seems weak.

How do I safely catch a bat that needs to be tested for rabies by the Maine Lab?

1. Avoid direct contact, wear leather gloves if possible.
2. When the bat lands, slowly place a small box, coffee can or other container over the bat while a piece of cardboard is slid between the bat and wall.
3. Tape the cardboard tightly to the container.
4. Refrigerate the bat (you do not need to kill it, and should not do anything to damage the head, as the brain is needed for testing.) In the case of a live bat, do not make breathing holes in the container. Do not freeze the bat. The state lab can accept living or deceased bats.
5. Send the bat to the state lab **immediately** if there has been a suspected exposure (but in any case, deliver it within a week of live capture or death).
6. Get a Rabies Submission Form and a Bite Report from the State Lab; complete these and submit with the specimen. ** See appendix for State Lab details.

Bat Control

BE PREPARED BEFORE YOUR SUMMER SEASON.
Along with making sure that bat entry points to inside living quarters are closed up in the spring, be sure to have a plan for handling a bat that blunders into a cabin. Educate your staff about the plan and about the unfounded fears of bats.
Using pesticides against bats is illegal and greatly increases the likelihood of sick or dying bats to come into contact with people and pets. Bat conservationists encourage us to learn how to live safely with these helpful mammals. Information on techniques to exclude bats from dwellings is available in the State of Maine Rabies Management Guidelines referenced at the end of this bulletin.

Consider bat houses

Under the right circumstances, bat houses (artificial structures for bats) can aid mosquito control efforts and give bats an alternate roost. Bats eat huge quantities of insect pests, and some species are fond of mosquitoes. But bat populations are declining for lack of places to live. You can help bats and reduce the number of insects in an area by installing bat houses. Depending on the size, a bat house can house colonies of from 200 to 1000 bats each.
Bat houses must be carefully sited to and mounted to maintain adequate temperature, ventilation etc. Bat Conservation International has information on proper mounting of houses, bat house designs, and ready made bat houses for sale at www.batcon.org Houses need to be erected in late March or April, before bats return for the season. Concerned about having a large bat population in bat houses? There is no evidence linking large bat colonies to increased rabies transmission to humans.

In the northern United States and Canada, little brown and big brown bats are the most frequent bat house users. No one has been known to contract a disease from little brown bats, while only three have been known to contract rabies from big brown bats in all of U.S. history. Children should be warned to leave all bats alone, just as they learn to leave bees and unfamiliar dogs alone.

IMPORTANT NUMBERS

RABIES TESTING IN MAINE IS CONDUCTED AT THE STATE OF MAINE HEALTH & ENVIRONMENTAL TESTING LABORATORY (HETL) IN AUGUSTA.

Health & Environmental Testing Laboratory
(207) 287-1706 – direct line to the lab. OR
(207) 287-2727

Emergency Consultation (after hours)
1-800-452-1999

PREPARING A SPECIMEN: See attached instructions for packaging a suspect rabies specimen & lab delivery details.

Information compiled from Bat Conservation International, at www.batcon.org and the State of Maine Rabies Management Guidelines: http://mainegov-images.informe.org/agriculture/ahi/Rabies%20Management%20Guide%202005.pdf