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A tip of the hat to bats

They do more good than bad

By Lisa Lieberman
Special to {Talk}

Let's face it, bats have been given a bad rap. They've been accused of being dirty, disease-carrying flying mice that will suck your blood any chance they get. But the truth is that out of the 1,100-plus vampire species in the world, only three are vampire bats, which mostly live in Latin America. And vampire bats do not attack people; they prefer to get their teaspoon-sized meals from animals such as cows, which are easier targets than humans. The rest of the bat species eat fruit, insects, nectar and pollen.

"One bat, the size of your pinky finger, will eat 600 to 1,000 mosquitoes in one night," says Burleigh Lockwood, a bat expert. "So, if you don't like mosquitoes, you better like bats." Lockwood, otherwise known as the "bat lady" at the Chaffee Zoo in Fresno, where she works as a wildlife biologist, spoke about the virtues of bats last Friday night to an audience of about 25 people at the Kaweah Oaks Preserve in Exeter.

As Lockwood spoke and the sun began setting, Sage Davis, a 12-year-old seventh grader from Three Rivers was swatting away at some mosquitoes flying around his head.

"I used to be really afraid of bats," Davis says. "I always thought they were going to land on me and bite me. I was surprised to find out that they weren't dangerous and that they were actually pretty cool." One of the major myths about bats is that they carry rabies. "The chances of you seeing a bat that has rabies is less than one-tenth of one percent," Lockwood says. "You're more likely to get sick from eating bad potato salad, than getting rabies from a bat."

Davis was one of the participants who got to pet the dead bat that Lockwood brought with her. "I couldn't believe how soft its fur is. It feels like silk," Davis says.

Davis was also surprised to find that the largest bat on earth has a head no bigger than the size of a ping-pong ball.

"Do you know how big the biggest bat on earth

is?" Lockwood asked the audience. "It's huge. It's enormous." And then, cupping her hands, "It's this big. It's no more than two or three pounds." The smallest bat on earth has a dime-sized body, she says. Most bats are so unimpressively small that in vampire movies, the vampires need "stunt doubles" to appear scarier than they are.

"In vampire movies, they'll show a close up of the vampire bat's face, whose body is about the size of your thumb. Then, they'll show the body of a fruit bat which is much bigger," Lockwood says.

As opposed to the "bad guy" role that bats play in movies, in real life, bats do much more good than harm.

Bats eat billions of tons of insects each summer, which helps protect farmers' crops and reduce the need for expensive pesticides. Fruit bats also contribute to over 450 commercial products and 80 medicines including "vampircillin," which is a medicine derived from bat saliva that helps prevent blood clotting in stroke victims. Bats also have the ability to "echo locate."

"They gauge distance, speed and direction by listening to the sound of the echoes," Lockwood says. "We've copied that by putting it in our submarines and calling it sonar. But bats are a whole lot better at it than us." Bats, which comprise one-quarter of the mammal kingdom on earth, are in fact, a lot like humans. They have hair; they bear live young, and feed their babies milk. They also rarely birth more than one baby a year. One big difference between humans and bats, however, is that bats have to learn to grow up fast.

"Bats are generally born in April. They learn to fly by July. They're independent by the end of August and then ready to go into hibernation by October," Lockwood says.

But baby bats have a high mortality rate since half of them end up falling off their mothers' backs during their first flights.

"The mother bats can't hold on to the babies, so the babies have to use their feet to hang on to their mothers' backs," Lockwood says. "And when the mother's flying and pulling 3gs around turns, it's one of the wildest rides you can imagine, and if you're a baby bat, you'd better hang on."



Photo/Corey Ralston

Burleigh Lockwood answers questions from children who are enthralled with Lockwood's collection of bats.