Bats of Utah

Bats are the most maligned and misunderstood of all mammals. Negative misconceptions surround bats despite the fact that most people know them only as mysterious fluttering objects observed at dusk on summer evenings. Mysteries aside, bats are fairly innocuous to humans. Bats don’t attack people to entangle themselves in their hair; they really aren’t interested in people at all. As mammals, they have hair, regulate their body temperatures internally, and nurse their young. Bats are the only mammals that fly, and although they have eyes and see very well, they also have the ability to navigate in the absence of sufficient light by using sonar. This sensory system is known as echolocation. It is this constant reaction to incoming echoes that makes a bat in flight appear to stutter or flutter, when in reality bats are super fast.

At least count, there are 925 bat species worldwide, 44 species in North America, and 18 species that reside in Utah. All 18 of Utah’s bat species are insects. In fact, these bats are perhaps the most significant predators of flight flying insects, giving them an important function in the ecosystem. During the day some bats roost in cavities such as caves and abandoned mines, while others prefer to roost in crevices and hollows of trees. Recent bat research indicates that numbers of some bat species in Utah may be declining, most likely from the loss of their natural roosting habitat. In light of this information, it is important to note that timber harvesting practices and abandoned mine closures can be undertaken in ways that benefit bats. Old and dead trees can be spared on logged sites to allow them to be used as bat roosts, and abandoned mines can be gated to keep people out while allowing bats continued access.

Bats should be admired rather than feared. They are capable of truly acrobatic displays as they forage for insects each night. With a minimum of effort, we can watch bats maneuvering around and over trees in the neighborhood, diving at moths under street lamps, or passing to and fro in the back yard. The emergence of a group of bats from a roost is truly a spectacular sight, with bats flying in close proximity to each other while avoiding collisions with other bats as well as objects in the landscape.

(Center Image: Pallid Bat with centipede. All photos supplied by J. Scott Altenbach)