



Going to Bat for ... Bats! *Gaining an Appreciation for Fascinating Flying Mammals*

Bats may be one of nature's most misunderstood creatures, often depicted by myths and movies as being ruthless, bloodthirsty and generally terrifying. As Halloween nears and bats have their day – well, it's a whole week! (October 24-31 is International Bat Week) – the team at MBPR encourages you to swoop in for some details about these amazing animals. (Please see our list of Bat Facts below.)

Bats are incredibly important to the ecosystem, pollinating plants and eliminating pests. They save American farmers billions of dollars a year by preventing crop damage and saving the cost of pesticides.

So rather than fearing these creatures, we should appreciate them. In fact, we hope you'll become as fascinated by them as we are and be inspired to visit two of our client regions, where you can get a glimpse of these creatures of the night and learn way more about them.

Mammoth Cave National Park near Bowling Green, Kentucky

It's right there in the name. The place is, in a word, mammoth ... the longest and largest cave system in the entire world. The latest stats indicate that 426 miles have been explored, with no end in sight. Back in the day, it was a free-for-all around here and people regularly crawled into and out of the cave whenever they pleased, but these days the only way in is with a ticket ... and a park ranger as your guide. The rangers here are great about pointing out all the wildlife on property, including bats.

A total of 13 types of bats have been confirmed at this national park, with two other species reported but so far unconfirmed. But surprisingly, they're not all found in the cave itself.

Some species live in the cave while they're waiting to give birth or during their very long winter hibernation, which lasts from mid-October to mid-April. Other species prefer to hang in trees and under bridges and the eaves of buildings around the park.

Three of the bat species at Mammoth have been declared either "threatened" or "endangered" by the federal government. The Indiana bat and grey bat are both endangered; the northern long-eared bat is threatened.

Scientists at the national park constantly monitor the health of the bat populations, and the parks hosts occasional public "Bat Nights" at which visitors are invited to watch as bats are captured from the cave, assessed and released.



This is a rare site: A bat on the wall of Lost River Cave, which is near Mammoth Cave. Because Lost River has a body of water inside the cave, it's prone to dampness and flooding ... which doesn't work for bats. Occasionally a young male bat will enter the cave looking for love ... but when he doesn't find a girlfriend, he heads back out.

Credit: Lost River Cave

[Marvel Cave in Branson, Missouri](#)

The deepest cave in Missouri (383 feet below the ground at its deepest point) is Marvel Cave, which today is located near the entrance to [Silver Dollar City](#), one of the nation's most celebrated theme parks. In fact, the park evolved from the cave, which was Branson's first tourist attraction.

The Osage Indians discovered the cave around 1500 but it has regularly been explored since the late 1800s, when miners entered looking for marble and lead. What they found instead was lots and lots of bat guano ... which could be sold for fertilizer and ammunition and collected a hefty fee of \$700 (more than \$20,000 in today's dollars) per ton. Yes, back in the day, you could get rich off bat poop!

Missouri is nicknamed "The Cave State," and that means it's home to plenty of bats. Of the 46 species found in this country, a third – 16 – live in Missouri. Four of those types live in Marvel Cave, including two types of brown bats, plus tricolor bats and endangered gray bats. Because of disease, pollution and pesticides, the bat population inside the cave is about a tenth of what it used to be. These days, there are about 40,000 bats at Marvel Cave.

The best time to see them is during the last two tours of the day. During those evening tours, guests stand a good chance of seeing bats in the cave's Mammoth Room and Cathedral Room.


Silver Dollar City loves its bats and pays homage to them at its annual [Harvest Festival](#). Carved pumpkins that look like adorable bats are part of the seasonal décor.





In case you don't get into Marvel Cave during your time at Silver Dollar City, during the annual Harvest Festival, you can get a glimpse of these gourd-geous pumpkin-style bats on display in the park.


Credit: Silver Dollar City


Bat Facts*


 Bats are the only mammals capable of true flight. (Take *that*, “flying” squirrels! You guys *glide*, not fly.)


 There are more than 1,400 bat species around the world, with 46 species found in the United States.


 Since bats are mammals, they give birth to live young. A baby bat is called a “pup,” and most mamas give birth to just one per pregnancy.


 Bats clean themselves much like cats do. They spend a lot of time grooming ... so they always look good for the humans who get those rare glimpses of them!

 You've heard the term “blind as a bat.” Compared to other animals, bats do have very poor eyesight. But they more than make up for that by having incredible hearing and amazing brains.

 Most bats are nocturnal, so they have special adaptations that help them get around and find food in the dark. They can fly fast and track small prey using “echolocation.” This means they emit high-frequency sounds that bounce off objects. They listen for those echoes and then their brains interpret the sounds so they can figure out what the object is. This is what allows them to avoid crashing into things (and each other) while grabbing insects to munch on mid-air.

 If you have mosquito problems in your backyard (if you have a pool back there, for example) but are hesitant to use pesticides, consider taking the natural route and using bats to combat the pests. You can make a “bat house” to try to attract them. A bat can eat its body weight in insects in each night ... and that can be up to 600 mosquitos!

 Climate change is making life incredibly difficult for bats. Heat waves and droughts cause overheating and starvation; wildfires destroy habitats; storms and heavy rainfall impact caves and flood bat roosts; and freezing temperatures block cave entrances or cause bats to freeze to death.

 A big risk for bats today is “white-nose syndrome,” a fungal disease that spread rapidly up and down the East Coast and has now moved across the country. The fungus, which appears as a white, fuzzy growth on the nose, doesn’t kill the bat. But the itching from the fungus causes bats to wake up during their hibernation – when there are no insects to eat – and results in the bat slowly starving to death. Though scientists have tried several ways to help bats build an immunity to the fungus, bat populations have plummeted in recent years.

*Facts provided by the U.S. Department of the Interior; National Park Service; and Marvel Cave guide Vivian Ireland, who referred to “Bats of Missouri” by Justin Boyles, John Timpone and Lynn Robins for Indiana State University Center for North American Bat Research and Conservation.

