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Bats are in Lee County, but there's no need for fear

Despite recent rabies scare, the risk is low

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Diamond Jim Swingholm isn't worried about the bat colony under the Fort Myers Beach Pier.

Swingholm, 80, said despite warnings by the Lee County Health Department after boys were seen handling a rabid Brazilian free-tailed bat, the creatures are relatively harmless.

"They've been here for five or six years," Swingholm said one recent morning, after a night of fishing. "You can see them late at night or real early in the morning. Sometimes, if a strong wind is blowing, you can see them flapping in the water. They'll even grab hold of your bobber. ... Other than that they won't bother you."

Bats recently became a focus of attention after the health department led an international search for two boys seen handling a rabid bat on the pier. The boys never were found, but three other kids who handled the bat received rabies shots.

While the pier has received the most attention, it is not the only place where bats hang out. Cullum Hasty, a Bonita Springs resident, lives along the Imperial River and often takes friends to see Bonita's bat bridge, where 4,000 to 5,000 bats huddle underneath Matheson Avenue.

Some other well-known spots for bats are the Matlacha Bridge, spanning Matlacha Pass near Pine Island, and the Interstate 75 bridge spanning the Caloosahatchee.

Because of the youths handling the rabid bat on Fort Myers Beach, Lee County Parks and Recreation officials two weeks ago attached a sign to the pier.

The sign - the only one in Lee County because of that bat colony's close proximity to people - says bats carry diseases, but also are beneficial to the environment.

"We put the sign up and had (two calls) since," said Vicki Marks, senior supervisor beaches and shoreline for Lee County Parks and Rec. "One lady called up and said a bat landed on her husband's foot and flew away. She said the bat didn't appear to be slow and it didn't seem to be a concern."

The second call came when a bat was found near the pier. It was taken to Sanibel's Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife, but won't be tested for rabies because it appears no one came in contact with it, said Jennifer James-Mesloh, spokeswoman for the Lee County Health Department.

Through June, the Lee County Health Department investigated 669 animal bites, 20 of which were bat bites - third most on the list.

According to the health department, 106 of the 669 bites examined in Lee County this year required follow-up treatment such as vaccinations.

"The (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) recommends that if you come in contact with a bat and can't guarantee that bat doesn't have rabies, then it's highly recommended that people get vaccinated. ... I don't think any parent wants to roll those dice," James-Mesloh said.

Bonita resident Hasty said if people see a bat during the day, it's most likely sick and has rabies.

"The first thing you have to remember is if you see one on the ground, don't pick it up - especially during the day," said Hasty, noting bats aren't interested in humans. "They do not fly down and bite you. They're beautiful little creatures."

Cyndi Marks, founder and director of the Florida Bat Conservancy in Palm Bay, has been working with bats for more than 20 years and said they shouldn't be feared.

"The chances of getting rabies from a bat is practically zero - unless you are bit," she said.

And Brazilian free-tailed bats aren't biters, she said. A few years ago, Marks captured 300 Brazilian free-tailed bats and suffered only one bite. Conversely, she captured 30 evening bats and almost every one of them bit her.

"You really have to work to get a Brazilian free-tail to bite you," she said.

Citing rabies tests on bats, Marks said about one-half of 1 percent of bats had rabies, but 10 percent of bats found on the ground had rabies. She also said just because one bat in a colony has rabies, it doesn't mean all do.

"(Diseased) bats tend to separate themselves from the colony, but I don't know if they do it themselves or they become outcasts," she said. "Rabies isn't something that spreads."

Additional Facts

By the Numbers

3,000 Amount of insects one bat eats during a night.

65 million Number of years bats have inhabited Earth.

1,000 Estimated number of bat species worldwide.

13 Number of bat species in Florida.
