

Bats Under the Bridge

By day, the Congress Avenue Bridge in the city of Austin could hardly look more normal: a grey, dreary city-centre road bridge. By night, it plays host to one of the most amazing shows nature has to offer. The underside of the bridge is home to more than a million bats, and every evening in summer they all come swarming out at once, rising up into the city sky like a tornado before spreading out in all directions like plumes of smoke. Standing on the bridge, you might even feel the wind from their wings as they pass by.

Austin is the capital city of the state of Texas in the USA, but it is also the bat capital of North America. The bats under the bridge attract thousands of visitors every year, and every August bat lovers celebrate Bat Fest on the bridge in their honour.

We interviewed Harriet Lopez, a bat expert, to find out more.



Q This ordinary bridge is popular with bats. What makes it such a hotspot?

A It's actually very appropriate that you call it a 'hotspot'. The gaps underneath the bridge are a perfect place for mother bats to raise their young. Baby bats are born hairless and have only a few months to develop before travelling south in autumn. They need somewhere warm and safe and the gaps under the bridge are just the right width to trap warmth nicely. These bat pups need to spend their energy on growth, not on keeping themselves warm.

Texas in general is a paradise for bats because of all its tasty insects. A mother bat will go out hunting every evening and consume about two-thirds of her body weight in insects every single night to meet her energy needs. The feeding frenzy can last all night.

Q Have there always been so many bats here?

A No, this large number of bats is quite new. A few bats had lived under the bridge for years. It was headline news when they suddenly began moving in by the thousands after engineers rebuilt the Congress Avenue Bridge in 1980 – they had no idea that they were creating such an ideal bat home. So, when these bats first came, they were seen as uninvited guests.

Many campaigned to have the bat colony eradicated. It was frightening. Back then, we thought they'd attack us by pulling out our hair or



that they'd carry disease. Gradually, though, we learnt the surprising truth: bats make ideal neighbours. They are gentle creatures that will not harm you, as long as you do not try to touch them.

Eventually we came to welcome the bats, and the population under the bridge grew to be the largest city bat colony in the world. Austin now has one of the most unusual and fascinating tourist attractions anywhere.



Q Why do you think so many people dislike bats?

A There's a lot of prejudice and misunderstanding about bats. People have difficulty seeing past the surface. With their teeth, claws and big, black wings, bats do look a bit frightening, but they are basically harmless if you don't hold them, and some of them are even cute. We should be protecting bats, not persecuting them.

Q There are millions of bats in Texas – how can they need protecting?

A It's true that bats easily outnumber humans in Texas, but they're vulnerable because they live in very large groups. One cave alone has 15 million bats living in it. Imagine if anything happened to that cave. 15 million bats would all become homeless at once, and many wouldn't survive, which would be very damaging considering the benefits bats bring to society.

Q What benefits could bats possibly bring to humans?

A We humans spend a great deal of time battling against insects. Who hasn't been tormented by mosquitoes or wasps? And farmers have to spend millions of dollars every year buying chemicals, some of which are quite harmful to the environment, to stop hungry insects from eating their crops. A group of bats like the ones under this bridge will eat about ten tonnes of insects every night. That's about the weight of two normal-sized elephants. So we should view bats as allies, not as enemies. Some farmers are already doing this by installing bat boxes in their fields and encouraging bats to live there.

Q Amazing – what helpful animals! Is there anything I can do to support bats in my area?

A If you have a garden, don't cover it in concrete. Fill it with flowers and plants to encourage garden insects. You could also put up your own bat box. They are quite easy to make if you don't want to buy one. And, finally, remember to let everyone know about our flying friends!

