

The Bats Are Back...Well, Some of Them



While South by Southwest (SXSW) comes to a close in Austin, Texas' bat season is just beginning. That's right, the Mexican free-tailed bats have begun their northward migration! To celebrate, here's a little "Q&A" to help answer any questions you may have about this awesome spring event.

If the bats are back, why can't I see them? **They migrate in waves.**

- When the bats are migrating up from Mexico, they don't all get here at once. Freetails usually travel in groups, cruising as high as 10,000 feet. By April, most will be settled into their summer roosts.
- Bats that have returned are emerging well past dusk.

Why do the bats come to Texas anyway? **They come for the food.**

- They migrate to areas with more abundant food supplies depending on the weather. So in winter, they migrate south and in spring, they migrate north.
- The Bracken bats - which is the largest bat colony in the world - can eat up to 150 tons of bugs each night - that's equivalent to eating 150 Toyota Prius cars!
- The bats that live under Austin's Congress Avenue Bridge for part of the year eat up to 20,000 pounds of bugs each night.
- Just before the bats leave Mexico, they mate. When they arrive in Texas, the females are pregnant, and the colonies at Bracken Cave Preserve near San Antonio and under Austin's Congress Avenue Bridge are both maternity colonies!

Are there other factors that affect when bats emerge? **Yes - mostly weather.**

- During times of drought, bats must emerge earlier in the evening because they have to fly farther to find food.
- Bats do not emerge when it's raining. Neither bats nor bugs (bats' food), fly well in the rain.

How long have bats roosted at Bracken Cave Preserve? **A long, long time.**

- For at least 10,000 years, Mexican free-tailed bats have lived at Bracken.
- Later this year, BCI will take deep guano core samples from the floor inside the cave. These samples will be carbon dated and chemically analyzed to help us better understand the history of this incredible and important bat roost.
- Preliminary results from a recent study suggests that the guano on the floor of the cave is more than 62 feet (19 meters) deep. That's a lot of bat poop!

How long have bats roosted at Austin's Congress Avenue Bridge? **Since the early 1980s.**

- In 1980, Austin renovated the bridge, inadvertently creating an ideal bat roost by adding a series of long, thin joints along the underside of the bridge. By 1984, bats by the hundreds of thousands were living at the bridge part of the year.
- Many Austinites wanted the bats to be eradicated. One local newspaper headline screamed, "Mass Fear in the Air as Bats Invade Austin." BCI's Founder, Merlin Tuttle, moved the nonprofit to Austin in 1986, partly to save the bridge bats. He and his staff launched a public education campaign and gradually convinced Austinites that they have little to fear and much to gain from the bats living under their bridge.

So bats don't need help, right? **Wrong.**

- The bats under Congress Avenue Bridge are "lucky" bats, embraced by an entire city. Around the world, most bats are at great risk, including the bats that live only an hour away at Bracken. BCI has been working for the past year to protect Bracken's bats from a proposed 3,500-home development. These houses, on quarter-acre lots, would be buildt adjacent to our Bracken Cave Preserve and directly under the twice-daily flight flight of these millions of bats. Thanks to the help and support of many of you, we are close to a purchase agreement for the proposed 1,520-acre development. For more information, please visit www.batcon.org/savebracken.

There you have it. Don't forget to pass on the knowledge!