

## How could this ‘little sweetie’ scare you?

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“Sweet” isn’t typically an adjective attached to bats, but Bryce Maxell believes that’s only because people dwell on the myths rather than realities of the nocturnal flying mammal.

Maxell, a bookish zoologist with a ready smile, recently surveyed bats along stream corridors in eastern Montana. He came back not only with documentation of bats in 10 counties where they previously weren’t known to exist, but also with a greater fondness for them.

“In general, in the popular culture they’re used as part of that fear thing that goes on around Halloween. That’s unfortunate,” Maxell said recently, from his office in Helena’s state library building.

He turns to his computer screen and pulls up a picture of a silver-haired bat resting on his hand.

“You can see what a little sweetie they can be,” Maxell said. “I’m not holding it; it’s just hanging out on my hand.”

Maxell works for the Montana Natural Heritage Program, which was created by the Legislature 20 years ago to learn more about the habitats and range of various lesser-known species, from plants to bats and other creatures. The idea is that these are more prevalent than realized and if properly documented, may not need to be considered threatened or endangered species.

The scientists also learn more about the habitats needed to ensure these species’ survival.

“Our mission is to have a statewide database regarding species of concern, and proactively do things to help them,” Maxell said.

The bat study he was on ran from the end of June to September, with Maxell and other scientists going out — mainly at night, since bats are nocturnal — to capture some of the 15 bat species in Montana and record basic information, like where they roost and ramble.

Like any good detective, these scientists made discoveries, such as learning that the eastern red bat may be reproducing in the state and not just migrating through Montana.

They used high-tech recording devices to capture the ultrasonic navigational chirps nearly-blind bats emit to keep from flying into walls or other barriers. Usually, those sounds are outside the human ear’s range, but new technology makes it possible to record the sound and slow it down so the clicks and chirps are audible and distinguishable.

Maxell peppers his conversation with little known bat facts: they hibernate during the winter, lowering their body temperature to near freezing in order to conserve energy; despite recent reports of rabies in Flathead County, you’re more likely to catch the disease from a skunk than a bat; and they remove “literally tons of insects” from the world.

He also believes that they're basically gentle creatures that will hang out and walk up your arm as long as you're not perceived as a threat.

"They're not aggressive or nasty," Maxell said. "They do have incredibly sharp teeth, but biting is a defensive thing, like if you had a 1,000-pound gorilla pick you up."

Even those blood-sucking vampire bats actually are gentle, in a sense.

"They're designed incredibly for what they do," Maxell said. "They have an anti-coagulant in their saliva and a narcotic numbing agent, so when they first land on a victim — mostly cattle — basically they're putting the localized skin area to sleep and most animals don't know they've been cut. And basically, their esophagus and mouth apparatus are designed to lap up blood.

"In general, bats don't represent a threat to people — although if they're out during the day on the sidewalk, it's a good bet that they might be diseased and you want to definitely stay away from them and call a health care worker. But bats in a barn, or in a house generally are a non-issue."

He did concede with a smile, however, that bats in one's belfry may be worth looking into.