



Urban Bats

Forty years ago, bridge renovations in Austin, Texas attracted an unwelcome visitor – in fact over a million of them.

Engineers had run support beams under the entire length of the bridge. Small slits between the beams opened into deep crevices ...

Just like those preferred by the Mexican freetail bat in their native habitat. Soon a huge colony lived under the bridge.

And many Austin residents wanted them out. They had heard horror stories – bats spread disease! They might bite us! But Merlin Tuttle, a bat ecologist, knew they were not only harmless, but beneficial.

Mexican freetails are insect eaters. Each evening this colony consumed more than 10 tons of mosquitoes and agricultural pests. The bats not only made Austin evenings more pleasant. They saved farmers downriver billions of dollars in crop losses and pesticides.

Tuttle took live bats to show journalists, business leaders and schools – who largely found them adorable. He explained how they were good neighbors.

Opinion began to change...and more visitors came. Humans this time, wanting to see the bats. Which brought two more benefits: tourism revenue, and civic pride -- of having the world's largest urban bat colony.

Today, on summer evenings, 1.5 million Austin bats stream out from the bridge, as thousands of locals and visitors admire their flight.

So y'all come down to Austin – where EarthDate is produced -- and check 'em out yourself.

I'm Scott Tinker.

Visitors gather on Austin's Congress Avenue Bridge each evening to watch hundreds of thousands of Mexican free-tailed bats stream into the evening sky.

Credit: [@MerlinTuttle.org](https://www.merlincott.com/)



SWITCH
ENERGY ALLIANCE

Background: Urban Bats

Synopsis: Austin's famous bat colony began as an accident when bridge renovations created thousands of roosting spaces beneath the Congress Avenue Bridge. Once viewed as a nuisance, the bats have become a celebrated symbol of the city and a reminder that wildlife can thrive in unexpected places.

Bat Fears and Phobias

- Chiroptophobia, an irrational fear of bats, is relatively uncommon, but many people have a general dislike or fear of these winged mammals.
 - Bats have long been associated with darkness, bad luck, and vampires. Their habit of emerging at dusk and roosting in caves and other dark places has inspired myths and legends around the world.
 - The discovery of vampire bats in the Americas during the 16th century strengthened these associations. In reality, only three of more than 1,400 bat species feed on blood, and they typically feed on livestock and wildlife rather than humans.
 - Popular culture, including Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and countless Halloween stories and films, reinforced the connection between bats and fear.
 - Superstitions persist today, including beliefs that bats fly into people's hair, spread widespread disease, or are generally dangerous.
 - The EarthDate episode [Beneficial Bats](#) addressed many of these misconceptions and explored the important ecological roles bats play in pollination, seed dispersal, and insect control.
 - Yet despite all these benefits, bats continue to be among the world's most misunderstood animals.
- Renovations in the 1980s widened the roadway and inadvertently created thousands of narrow crevices beneath the bridge. Box beams installed for additional support formed spaces less than 1.5 inches (4 cm) wide and 16-18-inch (40-46 cm) deep.
 - These crevices closely resembled the cracks and hollows bats use in cliffs and caves.
 - Mexican free-tailed bats quickly colonized the bridge, turning an ordinary transportation structure into an unexpected wildlife habitat.
 - What engineers viewed as structural features, bats viewed as prime real estate.
 - But many Austin residents were far from welcoming their new neighbors.



Long before it became home to Austin's famous bat colony, the Congress Avenue Bridge spanned the Colorado River high above the water. The creation of Lady Bird Lake in the 1960s raised water levels and changed the appearance of the bridge seen today.

Credit: National Photo Company Collection - Library of CongressCatalog: <http://lccn.loc.gov/2016820620>Image download: <http://cdn.loc.gov/service/pnp/npcc/18900/18948v.jpg>Original url: <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2016820620/>, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=66467236>

The Congress Avenue Bridge

- In 1910, the Congress Avenue Bridge was built in Austin, Texas, crossing the Colorado River. This river is unrelated to the Colorado River that carved the Grand Canyon.
- The concrete arch bridge replaced earlier wooden and iron structures. Spanning nearly 950 ft (288 m), it was later able to accommodate the creation of Lady Bird Lake after construction of Longhorn Dam in the 1960s.

Background: Urban Bats

Bat Backlash

- As the colony grew, so did public concern.
- Many residents believed the longstanding myths about bats and worried about rabies and other diseases.
- Petitions circulated demanding that the bats be removed from the bridge.
- Local headlines fueled the fear. One newspaper story proclaimed, "Bats Sink Teeth Into City."
- The bridge had accidentally become a wildlife habitat in the middle of a major city, but many people saw only a problem.
- As opposition mounted, bat conservationist Merlin Tuttle saw an opportunity where others saw only a nuisance.
- He explained how the bats consumed enormous numbers of insects and helped reduce agricultural pests.
- Through small meetings and personal conversations, he encouraged people to replace fear with understanding.
- This approach reflected a conservation philosophy he had developed over decades of work protecting bats.



Mexican free-tailed bats (*Tadarida brasiliensis*) transformed Austin's Congress Avenue Bridge into one of the world's largest urban bat roosts. The species migrates seasonally, spending summers in Texas before moving south to warmer regions of Mexico and Central America.

Credit: By U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Headquarters - Mexican free-tailed bat
Uploaded by Dolovis, Public Domain,
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=59236746>

Winning Friends, Not Battles

- Rather than confronting critics, Tuttle preferred what he called "winning friends instead of battles."
- He met with officials, community leaders, business owners, and residents, sharing scientific information about bats and addressing concerns directly.



Narrow crevices beneath the Congress Avenue Bridge provide ideal roosting spaces for Mexican free-tailed bats. What engineers designed as structural supports became an accidental wildlife haven for one of the world's largest urban bat colonies.

Credit: By News Oresund - 2019-11-27_Amager Bakke_Copenhagen Hill,
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Background: Urban Bats

A Proven Strategy

- The philosophy that helped change minds in Austin would later prove successful elsewhere.
- In northern Michigan, one of the nation's largest bat colonies had taken up residence in an abandoned mine.
- When the mining company prepared to seal the mine for safety reasons, Tuttle feared the closure would destroy an important bat habitat.
- Rather than launching a public fight, he began by speaking with local school children about bats.
- Students became enthusiastic supporters and encouraged their parents to attend community presentations.
- Gradually, local residents and company officials came to support a solution that protected both people and bats.
- The mine was secured for public safety while remaining accessible to the colony.
- The success demonstrated that education and cooperation could often achieve more than conflict.

From Nuisance to Attraction

- In Austin, attitudes gradually changed as residents learned more about their unusual neighbors.
- The colony that many people once wanted removed eventually became one of the city's most celebrated attractions.
- During spring and summer, Mexican free-tailed bats emerge from beneath the bridge each evening. Their numbers can exceed one million in some years.
- For 30 to 40 minutes before sunset, streams of bats fill the sky as they head out to feed.
- Visitors gather along the bridge, shoreline, and nearby boats to witness the spectacle.



Each spring and summer evening, visitors fill boats on Lady Bird Lake to witness the spectacular emergence of Mexican free-tailed bats from beneath Austin's Congress Avenue Bridge.

Credit: By [©MerlinTuttle.org](https://www.merlincuttle.org)

- What was once viewed as a public nuisance became a source of civic pride.
- Today, the bats contribute millions of dollars to Austin's tourism economy.
- The animals never changed. People's understanding of them did.

Unexpected Habitat

- The EarthDate episode [Wildlife Crossings](#) explored ways humans intentionally design infrastructure to help wildlife move safely across landscapes.
- The Congress Avenue Bridge tells a different story. The bridge was never intended to provide wildlife habitat, yet it became one of the world's most famous urban bat roosts.
- Similarly, an abandoned Michigan mine became an important refuge for thousands of bats after people chose to preserve it rather than eliminate it.
- In both cases, human-made structures unexpectedly became ecosystems.

Background: Urban Bats

- These examples remind us that wildlife can often find opportunities in places humans never intended.
- What began as a routine bridge renovation created an unexpected home for wildlife in the heart of Austin.
- Through education, cooperation, and a willingness to share space with nature, Austin transformed fear into fascination.
- Whether intentional or accidental, making room for wildlife can benefit both people and nature.

"Cooperation for a mutual benefit, a survival strategy very common in natural systems, is one that humanity needs to emulate." – Eugene Odum

References: Urban Bats

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