



Driving me Bat-ty”!

M.T. Alexander, Frederick County Master Gardener

My home is normally very quiet, especially at night, so it was unusual to be awakened several mornings at 3 AM with a rustling in the attic directly over my bed. My bedroom is on the south side of our rambler and is the farthest distance from the pull-down ladder in my garage. To reach that section of my attic requires some acrobatics that are beyond my abilities these days.

From the distant end of the attic, I could see something in the metal gable vent that, to me, looked like wasp's nests. Bad guess! I only had one option left and that was to borrow a ladder that was taller than my 12 ft one. I had hoped that in my retirement I would never need to go higher than that. As I approached eye level with the vent, I could see several very quiet bats watching me with curiosity. There appeared to be no more than 5 or 6 – no problem! After all, my neighbor has an empty bat house on the north side of his shed.

I immediately purchased enough metal hardware cloth (1/2 inch squares) to cover the opening and proceeded to close the vent from the outside. My cover was constructed so that I could open a corner as needed to allow the bats to escape. Just before dusk my wife and I could hear a lot of movement on the vanes of the metal vent. About 5 minutes after the fireflies began showing up, we had the great exodus. We could not believe our eyes. We stopped counting at around 50 and had to close up the opening as the earlier bats were returning from the south. I protected myself with safety glasses, a hat, and enough clothing to keep the bats from having direct contact with my bare skin. I had read that bats “can flatten themselves to 1/4 inch to slip through an opening,” and one returning bat proved this to be true. I closed up for the evening but I knew that my work was just beginning.

It occurred to me that, since the bats could squeeze through such small openings, they might gain access to the entire attic through the breathing vents in the roof overhangs. I decided to leave the access to the attic through the garage open for the next 4 days and did find two that had escaped. They were easily released.

The day after the great exodus, I left the gable vent open hoping that others may leave. The vent on the north side of the attic had been readily available but was not used. I closed that vent also with hardware cloth

I continued through the same ritual of opening the entrance at 7:30 PM and closing at 9:30 PM the next two evenings and several more bats chose to leave each night. On the fourth evening there was absolutely no activity, so I closed the vent for good.

In a few days we left to visit great-grand children in Nebraska and Illinois. We were happy to find that when we returned home, there was no indication of our ordeal with the colony of bats. Just days before our return, we had visited the zoo in Omaha with two of our great-grandchildren and watched the fruit bats there with a new-found appreciation for the life of a bat.

Note: Maryland has a website at the Department of Natural Resources that will provide you with all of the information that you need to handle bat problems in a humane and practical way. They also provide a list of commercial licensed experts to assist you.

The Home and Garden Information Center web site sponsored by the University of Maryland has a fine fact sheet on bats that may be accessed at <http://plantdiagnostics.umd.edu/level3.cfm?causeID=81>

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