

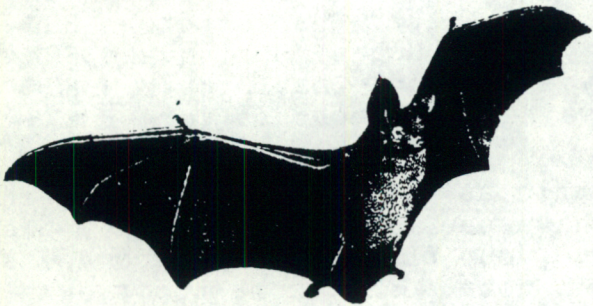
Bats on the Island

BY JENNIFER BROWN

Bats are one of the most maligned of animals orders, but they have recently begun to gain in popularity. In Europe, several species have undergone population declines, largely due to destruction of foraging and hibernation habitat. Now, through public education and legal protection, awareness and appreciation of these unique winged mammals is on the rise.

In P.E.I. only one species of bat has been recorded, the little brown bat, Myotis lucifugus. Little brown bats are the most common and far-ranging bat species in North America, with confirmed sightings as far north as central Alaska. These bats are ubiquitous in P.E.I. and their presence is made obvious by their use of outbuildings and houses for maternity colonies, and by the large numbers of bats seen over rivers and ponds in summer.

In 1958, Austin Cameron conducted a survey of Island mammals. He confirmed the presence of the little brown bat and reported a possible sighting of a red bat (Lasiurus borealis), however there have been no confirmed sightings of this species. The red bat and several other species such as the silver-haired and the hoary bat may possibly occur in P.E.I., but because of their habits, these bats are much harder to find. They are more solitary and secretive than little brown bats, foraging and roosting singly or with immediate family.



During the summer of 1984, while studying biology at U.P.E.I., I conducted a research project on Island bats. Using a broad band microphone and oscilloscope I was able to monitor bat echolocation calls and determine the species of bats present in an area. A mist net was used to capture bats for observation of their sex and reproductive state, and several bats were kept and prepared as specimens.

Results of this study give us insight into the foraging habits, distribution and reproductive biology of little brown bats in P.E.I. These bats are insectivores and feed largely on those notorious insect pests, the mosquito and black fly. Anyone lucky enough to have bats in their home or outbuildings will benefit by having reduced numbers of these insects.

Many questions about Island bats remain unanswered. For example, where do they hibernate? It is believed that P.E.I. brown bats migrate to caves in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick each fall to hibernate. These bats are not known to hibernate in trees or buildings, and there are no natural caves in P.E.I., so this migration is a necessary part of their yearly cycle. The exact hibernacula (caves) used by Island bats are still unknown. During my study, 30 bats were banded and released in hopes that some would be discovered in mainland caves, however, none have been reported to date.

Because of the little brown bats' migratory habits, some people have suggested that these bats may eventually transmit the rabies virus to P.E.I. This is not a likely possibility, because in areas where both little brown bats and rabies occur, the bats have not been indicated as a vector for the virus. It is more probable that the virus could be brought by coyotes or a family cat or dog.

After one summer of working with bats, I have become quite enamored