

AT HOME

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URBANA ARTS PROJECT

Making bats safe at home

Artists build 7 houses for flying mammals, hope to dispel myths

By MELISSA MERLI
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URBANA — Collaborating under the name Let's Re-Make, artists Bonnie Fortune and Brett Bloom make environmental issues part of their art practice.

One of their latest projects brings attention to an important and overlooked subject: bats and how they use the built environment and help the natural one.

Funded in part by a city of Urbana arts grant, the artists recently made seven bat houses from recycled wood, painted them a dusky blue and fixed them on top of 16-foot poles.

They then installed the bat hotels in Urbana at host locations near food and water sources such as vegetable gardens and ponds.

Bats are not yet roosting in the new digs built specially for them: Bloom and Fortune hope the flying mammals make use of the houses starting next spring, after they come out of hibernation.

The bats would enter through spaces at the bottom of the 45-inch-high rocket-box chamber and, once inside, could move up and down and experience the various microclimates inside the box, Bloom said.

The ventilation holes on the north- and south-facing walls are small enough to prevent entry by most predators, though bats will not go into a house occupied by wasps, said Joe Kath, endangered species manager for

the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

"When you put a house up, if you put it up now, make sure before next spring that there are no wasps in there," Kath said.

Bloom and Fortune recently led a walking tour of bat houses they installed in yards on West Iowa Street and South Maple Street. The tour ended at a vacant lot on Urbana Street, where people had reported seeing bats. Indeed, soon after arriving there, the bat watchers saw a few of the elegant creatures swooping overhead.

Spotting them, a young boy on the tour said, "I'm scared of bats."

"You shouldn't be. They won't hurt you," Bloom said.

"They eat insects that bite you or make you itch," Fortune said.

Another aim of the two artists is to dispel misconceptions about bats.

"The most common fear is that bats transmit rabies," they wrote on their website, www.letsremake.info. "All mammals are susceptible to this disease, but less than half of 1 percent (of bats) contract rabies. If a bat has rabies, it will die quickly and unlike dogs or cats will seldom become aggressive. Remember any bat that can be caught is most likely ill and should not be handled."

Another myth is that bats are blind.

"In fact, they can see everything but color as they fly at night, even down to a strand of hair," the artists wrote. "They use a system called echolocation to navigate in total darkness. High-frequency pitches bounce off objects to give bats a sense of their surroundings through sound."

And perhaps most impor-



ABOVE: Let's Re-Make artist Brett Bloom, left, points out to Walter Matherly some of the features on one of seven bat houses Let's Re-Make built in Urbana. Bloom recently moved to Denmark.

LEFT: Let's Re-Make artist Bonnie Fortune laughs as Sharon Irish holds one of the bat cookies she made for a garden party after the tour of bat houses.

Melissa Merli photos/
The News-Gazette

tantly, as Fortune told the boy, bats are an important part of the ecosystem, eating insects that can damage crops and annoy people.

In fact, bats are the No. 1 predators of rootworms in their moth stage, accord-

ing to Kath. Rootworms damage corn and soybean crops. Bats also feed on other moths, beetles, flies and smaller insects like mosquitoes.

Generally, they go after the larger insects because

they supply more of their nutrients, Kath said.

"A single bat can consume several thousand mosquitoes in a single night of feeding but will hit the

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LYNDA ZIMMER
BULLETIN BOARD

Bakers seeking answers



Bread bakers have questions today.

Q: I need instructions for a Kitchen Pro bread maker, model

number R970013985 that I "inherited." Claudette Hawley, Urbana.

A: All of the references I found on the Internet to Kitchen Pro bread makers used model numbers starting with the numbers 67. I found a complete manual for that number sequence that I printed out for you. Perhaps it will work.

Readers who have another instruction manual that Hawley may borrow to copy may call her at 418-9277.

Q: I am looking for a slicing guide for slicing bread loaves evenly. Where may I buy one? Marlene Baker, Tolono.

A: The Kitchens store at Market Place Mall in Champaign carried them for 10 years but can no longer get them from its suppliers.

I found several sources on the Internet — Amazon.com and eBay — with prices ranging from \$16 to \$26. The sturdiest-looking version, a Norpro, with an acrylic guide and wood box base, may be ordered for \$20 at 800-321-1073.

A comment from one woman on the Internet said she found her used slicing guide at a charity resale store for \$3.

If any readers know of a local source, please contact the column and call Baker at 485-3135.

Readers, FYI

If anyone needs Necchi sewing machine parts and needles or trays for an Argus slide projector from the 1960s and 1970s, I have them to give away. Joan Freestone, Urbana. Call Freestone at 367-9223.

I have — to give away — a sewing machine cabinet (the machine needs a little work), bulk stuffing and flower vases. Joan Johnson, St. Joseph. Call Johnson at 469-7509.

BATS

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larger insects first," he said. (Some experts believe mosquitoes are not a major part of a bat's diet.)

Bats also pollinate plants. "They're just as important if not more important than insect pollinators like bees, and most people don't know that," said Kath, one of the state's leading experts on bats.

Bloom and Fortune hope their network of bat houses helps support the area bat population and starts conversations about the benefits of bats and about remaking the built environment.

"Current city planning and architecture does not promote biodiverse relationships with wildlife," they wrote. "Bats, among other wildlife, are confronted with habitat encroachment and loss. Bats need adequate roosting structures to support their populations. Making structures for bats prevents their use

White-nose syndrome spreading but hasn't hit Illinois

White-nose syndrome, a fungus that experts believe has killed 1 million plus bats in the United States in a few years, has not yet reached Illinois.

But Joe Kath, one of the state's leading experts on the flying mammals, is "literally holding" his breath because of the rapid progression of the syndrome and because white-nose was found this past spring in bats in Missouri, just across the Mississippi River.

"Unfortunately, it's just a matter of time before we get a positive in the state," Kath said.

So far, white-nose syndrome has hit bats in most of the northeastern United

of existing architecture for roosts and colonies."

While building their bat structures, Bloom and Fortune followed plans from Bat Conservation International, saying those are the best for attracting bats. Kath noted that there are many different

States, Ohio, Kentucky, Missouri and Oklahoma.

"That's the farthest west and south that we know of at this point," Kath said.

Scientists do not yet know what causes white-nose syndrome, which results in a white fungus around a bat's nose. The fungus saps the animal's energy, leading it to leave hibernation early to search for food when none is available.

"It is believed that it is a non-native fungus presumably of European origin," Kath said.

Illinois has 12 native species of bats; four are formally listed as endangered in Illinois. Two of the species, the Indiana bat and the gray

designs, with new ones popping up all the time. Those attached to houses generally don't attract bats, Bloom said.

Though some bat houses, even if done right, never attract bats and some do, "by putting one up you have noth-

ing to lose," Kath said. "Typically once a bat or group of bats finds a bat house, they'll return to it year after year. All it takes is that one time for the animal to find it and use it. They more or less will recruit other bats to that site."

MELISSA MERLI