

Bats!



Austin's bats

The city of Austin, in Texas, has an original tourist attraction. Every evening vast numbers of bats fly out from under the Congress Avenue Bridge in search of food. They return the following morning and go to sleep. There are an estimated 1.5 million Mexican bats at the bridge. They are usually females and they migrate north to Texas from Mexico in March. They live in holes or deep openings in the bridge and give birth to baby bats. The mothers and their babies fly back to Mexico in November.

BUT WHY AUSTIN?

There have always been bats in Austin, but the numbers increased dramatically in 1980 when the city decided to restore the Congress Avenue Bridge. The new bridge had narrow deep openings and these offered a perfect habitat for the migrant bats. The bats came to the bridge and so did humans. Every evening tourists stand on the bridge, with their cameras and iPhones ready. The show lasts an hour and the black clouds of bats produce wonderful photographs.

SURVIVAL

In the past people were less enthusiastic about bats. They considered them a pest and tried to exterminate them. Fortunately, BCI (Bat Conservation International) began a campaign to explain that bats are not dangerous, that they are not interested in your hair, and that they are in fact ecological. Every night in Austin the bats eat between 5,000 and 10,000 kg of insects. Often these insects damage crops, so the farmers of Austin save a lot of money on pesticides.

BAT PARKING!

Today Austin loves its bats. Every year the bats of Congress Avenue Bridge generate \$10 million in revenue for the city. The local newspaper, The Austin Statesman, lets visitors to the bridge park for free in its parking lot. There are also “bat-themed” souvenirs on sale near the bridge: tourists can buy baseball caps, T-shirts, stickers and badges from the many street traders.

THE BAT HOTLINE...

If you go to Congress Avenue Bridge, please remember to take an umbrella: this is not for the rain... And if you want to know at exactly what time the bats will come out tonight, call the “Bat Hotline.” The number is (512) 416-5700, extension 3636.

BAT FACTS

The baby bats are born in June. Typically, a baby bat's weight is one third of that of its mother.

Baby bats start catching insects by themselves when they are only five weeks old.

Bats are harmless, but they smell!

The city of Austin's human population is about 750,000: during the summer there are more bats than people in Austin

COMPREHENSION CHECK

Read the article and the fact file and answer the questions.

1. What are the bats looking for when they fly out every evening?
2. Where do they arrive from in spring?
3. Where do the females make their nests?
4. Why did the number of bats increase after 1980?
5. What wrong ideas did people have about bats in the past?
6. What financial advantages do the bats bring to the countryside and the town?
7. When do baby bats become independent?
8. What unpleasant characteristic do bats have?

Answers

1. They are looking for food. 2. They arrive from Mexico. 3. In the holes or deep openings in the bridge. 4. Because they restored the bridge in 1980 and made deep openings which were a perfect habitat for the bats. 5. They thought they were pests and that they were dangerous and flew into people's hair. 6. The farmers save money on pesticides because the bats eat 50,000 to 10,000 kilos of insects every night. The town makes \$10 million every year from the tourists that come to see the bats. 7. When they are five weeks old. 8. They smell.