

Big Bend National Park Ranger Mary Kay Interviews a Non-Vampire Bat

While hiking a trail recently, I met a friendly bat who was willing to answer some questions I had about him and his friends.

Ranger: Before we start, I have to ask you this. You aren't a vampire bat, are you?

Bat: Oh, no! I'm a Mexican free-tailed bat. During the winter I sometimes hang out with some vampire bats way down in southern Mexico, but they don't like to be cold, so they won't visit me here.

Ranger: So you won't bite me during this interview?

Bat: I might if you try to touch me! We bats don't like to be touched. It's probably hard for you humans to resist, because we're so soft and cute.

Ranger: You do look really soft and fuzzy, but I promise not to pet you. So if you don't eat blood, what do you eat?

Bat: My friends and I eat insects. We especially like moths and beetles—those are our favorites—but we also eat mosquitoes, termites, flying ants, and pretty much anything else that flies in front of us. Some of my friends, the pallid bats, also eat scorpions and centipedes.

Ranger: That sounds dangerous!

Bat: Well, for a human it would be. But the pallid bats are immune to the scorpions' sting, so it doesn't bother them.

Ranger: That's amazing. But it doesn't look like there's a lot of meat on a moth or a mosquito. On average, how many insects does it take to make a meal?

Bat: I try to eat about one-third of my body weight in insects every night. Now, some of the female bats who are nursing babies will eat about half their body weight or more in insects every night. Some of my bat friends, the cave myotis, can eat about 600 mosquitoes per hour, and up to 3,000 mosquitoes per night.

Ranger: Three thousand mosquitoes per night? That's incredible! But you don't look overweight; how can you eat so much and stay so slim?

Bat: Aerobics. Try flying over a fifty-square-mile area every night, and you'll stay pretty slim, too. Plus I've just returned from southern Mexico for the winter. Migration will sure burn off the calories!

Ranger: So that's why we don't see you bats around here much in the winter. Do you ever hibernate?

Bat: No, I fly south to warmer areas instead. But some of the other bats here do. They'll spend the winter in caves, rock crevices, mines, or under tree bark. They sleep all winter to avoid the cold. Personally, I prefer sunny Mexico.

Ranger: Let's go back to what bats eat. In other parts of the world, bats eat fruit. Do you or any of your friends here in Big Bend eat fruits or berries?

Bat: No, most of us stick with pure protein. None of that sugary stuff. But there are some bats here that eat nectar. Look around the blooming century plants this summer in the Chisos Mountains and you might see some of the nectar-eating bats—they're called Mexican long-nosed bats because they spend most of the year in Mexico, and their noses are long and pointy. I only see them here in June and July.

Ranger: At least nectar and fruit sit still while you eat them. How do you catch insects? I've heard that you bats use sonar.

Bat: That's right! We make really high-pitched noises like this...

Ranger: I don't hear anything.

Bat: Because most of our bat sounds are too high-pitched for you humans to hear. Anyway, we make this noise and then listen for the echo. By listening to the echo, I can tell you a lot about whatever the sound bounced off of. I can tell you how far away the insect is, how fast it's moving, how big it is, all kinds of things. In fact, I can find objects as fine as a human hair just by using my echolocation system!

Ranger: Maybe that's why lots of people think bats are blind, since you can fly around in the dark so well.

Bat: We bats can still see. We just don't rely on our eyes the way that you humans do.

Ranger: I see that you're hanging inside a dead tree branch today. Don't you bats normally live in caves?

Bat: Your national park doesn't have many caves, so we bats have to make do with rock shelters and crevices, dead trees, and mine shafts. Mine shafts are neat because they're so much like caves! Sometimes we live in buildings with you humans, or even in the expansion joints in bridges.

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