Do you have

LITTLE BATS IN THE WALL?

Few modern houses sport a belfry, but the phenomenon of a wall full (or roof full) of microbats is not all that unusual.

Microbats, the small insectivorous bats that use echolocation to track prey on the wing, shelter during the day in any suitably sized crevices, tree hollows and caves. Cavity walls of houses are ideal if there is a gap sufficient to allow their comings and goings.

Q. THERE'S SOMETHING IN THE WALL OF OUR HOUSE. WE HEAR FAINT SKITTERING SOUNDS AND IT SOUNDS AS IF THERE ARE HUNDREDS OF THEM. WHAT COULD THEY BE?
A. Insectivorous bats or microbats.
These are the tiny bats of the night that do an enormous service to humans from their insect feeding habit. They are very different from the giant 'bats' or flying-foxes which roost in large conspicuous camps in trees. The little bats are a rather flattened arrangement and if the head will fit, the rest will too. In any given region there are usually a few species that are happy to colonise a cavity wall in a house if they can get in.

Q. WILL THEY DO ANY HARM IN THERE?
A. Yes, unfortunately they can.
As much as I love them, a large colony of microbats in the wall can eventually lead to serious problems. The bats begin to fly out after dusk and immediately begin feeding. To rest they return to the roost site in the wall and that's where the fun begins. As their food is digested and becomes waste it now has to be excreted and this they do in the wall. Whilst this doesn't sound great to us, it is all part of their grand plan as the scent of the latrine section at the bottom of the wall is an aid to their relocating the campsite.
If the species is one of the larger ones that form big roosting groups of five or six hundred animals, the latrine soon grows. There is nothing unhealthy for them in this, but there can be for us. Dried bat droppings can form an aerosol that if inhaled, has disease problems for humans. The build up of guano can also do a great deal of damage to the wall depending of the material it's constructed from.

Q. CAN WE GET A PEST CONTROLLER TO FIX THE PROBLEM?
A. A very experienced pest controller yes, but I would check their method before engaging them.
Solving this problem to the satisfaction of all concerned needs special care and experience. The bats don't deserve to be harmed as they have only taken advantage of a 'faulty' building. They are also fully protected in all States of Australia which might raise the issue of offences and penalties if any are in fact harmed. If done correctly, the walls can be freed of bats; the bats provided with an alternative roost site and be retained in the backyard to go about their insect feeding work which is of great benefit to all of us.

Q. WHERE DO YOU START?
A. You need to identify the flyout points.
A seven or eight millimetre gap is all that it takes to allow the passage of the small bats. These can occur as a result of the slight buckling of weatherboards over the years and can be seen from below, looking up the walls. The best method of searching for them is to go to the outside of the wall that the bats are heard in. On dusk, the occupants will be seen emerging from the gaps and flitting off into the sky. Sometimes the flyouts have been created by the design or execution of the building when the sloping gable roof fits over horizontal weatherboards or fibre-cement manufactured to resemble weatherboards.

The light will be quite dim by the time the exit is in full swing, but you will still be able to see where they are emerging from. Regardless of the nature of the gaps, they need to be filled. Modern gap-filling products are ideal and the work can be carried out in the daytime, but it is vital that a section of the gap is left unfilled to allow the bats to escape.

You need to make sure that the unfilled section is selected from a part of the flyout that bats were definitely seen to emerging from. The most used section is the best to pick and leave untreated.

Q. HOW DO I KNOW WHEN ALL THE BATS ARE OUT?
A. You don't and they won't.
This is the tricky bit. The microbats, unlike most other nocturnal animals, don't go out and stay out all night. Some emerge, fly around and feed then return to the roost to rest while others take their turn in the sky. At any one time it has been estimated that as much as one third of the total colony will be in the roost site. So if the flyouts are blocked up even at night, about one third of the bats will be fatally trapped inside.

Q. SO HOW DO I GET THEM ALL OUT?
A. With a 'bat-valve'.
The 'bat-valve' is designed to allow the bats to emerge from the roost but prevent them from getting back in. This way all the bats will be outside the next day when the rest of the gap can be filled permanently. A bat valve can be made from a plastic garbage bag. One layer of the plastic is taped immediately above the flyout and the lower lip taped to the lower edge. The bottom of the bag then cut open to form a wide plastic tube through which the bats can slide down and fly out but not be able to get back up and into the roost. The bag should be trimmed to provide about a 600mm length of 'tubing'.

The valve should be left in place for a few days and the presence/absence of the bats monitored if there is any doubt that some might remain. If the familiar sounds are still being heard in the wall, it is certain that not all the flyout area has been correctly identified and you will have to look elsewhere around the wall or house. When the wall is clear of bat sounds, the valve is removed and the remaining escape hatch filled.

Q. CAN I DO THIS AT ANY TIME OF THE YEAR?
A. No.
It is important to be certain that no dependent, non-flying young are in the roost. The young of microbats are born in late spring and remain with their mothers until the end of January. Part of this time is spent as a non-flying bat. If roost sites are closed off at this time they are doomed. The best time to undertake the gentle bat eviction method is in autumn, or at least after February and before June when we are sure that all living bats are fully aerodynamic.

Q. WHERE WILL THEY GO IF I EVICT THEM?
A. We don't know, but we do care.
Most zoologists worry that at least some of the bats will perish if alternative roosting is not provided. This is not known for certain and it may be that most, if not all, will actually survive by simply finding little nooks and crannies in trees nearby. But to be on the safe side I would recommend that an alternative bat-house be set up in a nearby tree if this is possible. Several may be needed depending on the size of the camp. I would recommend contacting Hollow Log Homes at Kenilworth, Queensland for a bat-house design that really works. www.hollowloghomes.com.au

Bat Rescue Inc

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