

BOREAL BITS

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HALLOWE-EN CRITTERS

*“And scary things shall ply the night
And creep and crawl and cause us fright.”
E.B. Philips –Special Days*

The end of the month is dominated by Hallowe'en, the night when all the spooks and goblins run amok as a parting gesture before All Saints' Day arrives and puts a lid on all the tomfoolery. But the baddies who venture out on this scariest of nights need their companions and folklore has provided them with a few bats, owls, spiders and, of course, black cats. The latter two we shall leave to other columnists or articles, and instead discuss whether the first two—residents of dark hours or, at least, dark places—deserve the reputation that puts them among witches, wizards, walking skeletons and more.

Not all owls, of course, limit their activities to the hours of darkness. Yet most of these raptors are nocturnal and superbly adapted to nighttime hunting thanks to evolutionary adaptations. Their eyes are very large and allow much better night vision than a diurnal creature. This is made possible by a specialized retina that captures light much more efficiently.



There are advantages to night hunting. Among the greatest may well be the inability of prey to see the predator. Couple the owls' superb eyesight with equal superb hearing and you have a winning combination. If you were to see an owl's head plucked of feathers you would surely notice the large ear slots on either side of the head and the fact that one ear is higher than the other, all the better to triangulate and thus determine location. Owls also can enjoy silent flights thanks to bristles on the leading edges of their wings. Some nature writers have termed owls 'silent death' for this reason. Often their prey doesn't know they are present until it is too late.

As with all creatures, owls are very vulnerable during their early stages of their lives and themselves fall prey to predation, disease and starvation. Without these population controls, we would be overrun with the birds. The best time to hear owls is in the early spring when the mating urge sends the birds into night songs. Even better, contact the Ministry of Natural Resources and become a volunteer for the owl survey that occurs each year. Certain owls are targeted each year and volunteers are given routes to follow and a tape. The technique is simple; travel a certain distance, play the taped call of the target species and listen for a reply.

Bats and haunted houses go together like dandelions and sunshine. Their specialty—at

least the bats we have here—is capturing insects and evolution has outfitted them very well for the task. Their radar is so acute it can determine the presence of moths and other flying nocturnal insects. They have been using the technology so long that some moths have developed a defense and will change their flight path dramatically or go into a free fall when they detect the sounds emitted by foraging bats. The bat-in-the-hair myth is just that, a myth but whether bats prefer haunted houses is still in question.



Some friends of ours had a problem (in the form of scuttling sounds and squeaking) in their attic and were given a solution that rid their house of the mammals in one night. At a time of year when there were no dependant young, our friends were instructed to wrap the upper portion of their barn-style roof in a mesh-like material. Bats leaving the crevasses in their siding encountered the mesh and climbed down it until they were free. However, they were unable to return to the attic because they always sought direct access to the crevasses, and, of course, these were protected by the mesh. The bats finally gave up and searched for another home. Once all the bats had fled, the crevasses were filled and our friends' problem was solved.

Bats may fly with witches on Hallowe'en in some areas of the continent but certainly not in our corner of the Shield. In that bats are insectivores, by the time the end of October arrives, they will have fled to warmer climates weeks ago, and/or sought hibernacula (locations in which to hibernate) in some cave or mineshaft that offers them stable above-freezing temperatures and high humidity during the winter.

As for being spooky, bats are just doing their job and that is ridding the night air of insects. *(Photos – Wm Burke/ P. Burke)*