



Barcelona's BATS

They may look spooky, but they sure eat a lot of mosquitoes. And, they're on the city's coat of arms.

By Suzy Taylor. Photos by Jelena Todorovic

The long evenings are a relief after the heat of the day, the eldest and the youngest of Barcelona's residents have once again taken over the plaças. Above the clamour of voices and the chink of glasses, swallows are swooping and chittering at breakneck speed around the rooftops, angular dark wingspans against the waning light of the evening. But look more closely...are you sure those are swallows? Because among the plummeting soaring silhouettes flitter smaller shapes in raggedy patterns, dodging and darting through the graceful dives of the swallows.

Though unnoticed by most, when the swallows finally abate their shrill calls and the sun retreats behind the irregular city skyline, the air is abandoned to the whim of hundreds of small furry bats, whose crooked flight is due to being guided by sonar waves, which echo off other objects. In any place where insects accumulate, such as around streetlights or fountains, bats will gather to feast, and at this time of year, in July and August, their flitting forms become much more noticeable around the plaças because this is the time when the babies learn to fly and leave the roost. A hungry bat, and the most common types only weigh about 15 grammes, can eat up to six insects a minute, and in an entire night may gorge itself on as many as 350 buzzing individuals. In a city like Barcelona, with a high level of humidity and plenty of rubbish on the streets to attract all sorts of bugs, bats serve as a highly efficient form of pest control. That's a lot of mosquitoes that never get to bite.

In winter, when the insects disappear, the bats seek out a peaceful place to hibernate. They prefer caves or tunnels and can travel long distances to find a comfortable winter hideaway. For daytime roosts during the summer they are happy to hang up in all sorts of holes and gaps, such as under roof eaves or inside hollow trees. If you want to

go bat-spotting, roosts are popular around the old parts of the city, where the bats can squeeze into gaps between walls or under roofs, and in places like the Parc de la Ciutadella, swarming with insect delicacies. They can be found in many places around Barcelona, as well as in a variety of locations in the city's surrounding areas of countryside.

But, bats are delicate mammals and, like many wild animals, their numbers are dwindling as their natural habitats are destroyed. For this reason, organisations such as Fundación Tierra find that bat conservation is not an easy task. In Spain, bats are protected by law, which makes it illegal to capture, possess or sell them, but no ruling yet exists for the protection of colonies of bats, either in hibernation sites or roosting areas. In Barcelona city the most common is the Pipistrelle bat, measuring about 20 centimetres from wingtip to wingtip. But, Catalunya's landscapes provide a home to some 25 species, most of which live away from cities, in low mountainous areas. The Ebro Valley is one of the areas that boasts the highest population of bats, and conservation groups there are carrying out projects to preserve their habitats and numbers. As a migratory species, Catalan law protects their habitat, but Barcelona's bats are most threatened by the destruction of their hibernation and roosting sites, caused when buildings are renovated or destroyed. Although nesting sites can be small, and bats usually roost in smallish groups, they can gather in the hundreds in the winter to hibernate. They are also vulnerable if disturbed while in hibernation, as when awakened they are weak and slow to react to danger. For this reason, the conservation experts at the Fundación want to change the law so that it is illegal to disturb places of hibernation between the months of September and April.

A further contributing factor in the decreasing numbers of bat species is their lack of popularity as animals. As shy and nocturnal crea-

tures, they are little known and understood by most humans. Owing to many years of myths and legends wreathed around them, as well as beliefs that stem from their unearned reputation as bloodsuckers, they have generally received a bad press. One popular Spanish legend tells that God and the Devil had a contest to create a bird, and God created the swallow, while the Devil produced the bat. It is also told that God damned the bat, condemning it to live in the entrails of the earth and venture out only in darkness, when one of them mocked Jesus on the cross. This demonic affiliation is typical of many legends and beliefs held about the nocturnal species.

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Such gloomy associations, however, were only contrived with the sweep of the Inquisition, and its obsessions with paganism and witchcraft. More observant wanderers through the streets of Barcelona will have noticed ornate bats adorning many of the city's monuments and buildings. The origins of the bat as an important symbol in Catalunya are from the 13th century, when the region was part of the great kingdom of Aragon and under the rule of Jaume I the Conqueror. The monarch adopted the bat as a symbol of protection and a warning against danger during the reconquest of Spain from the Moors. There are several tales to explain the symbol, such as that of the bat which roosted one night in the king's battle tent, and according to the popular superstition of the time, thus warned him of a forthcoming enemy attack. At the end of the 13th century, when Jaume I awarded the city of Barcelona its right to self-government, the bat was added to the city's coat of arms. The same image, wings outspread, graced many coats of arms throughout the ancient kingdom of Aragon, and still remains today over the shield of Valencia, as well as on that of its football team. The very first coat of arms of Football Club Barcelona, in 1899, intended as an homage to the city, also bore its coat of arms with a bat crowning the image.

As a result of its symbolism as a protector against peril, and its association with the alertness and bravery of Jaume I, the bat can be found as ornamentation on much of Barcelona's diverse artwork. Gaudí incorporated the image into his representations of the natural and the fantastic, and bats can be seen in many of his designs, such as the bat displayed at the top of the spire of Palau Güell, built in 1885, and on each of the ornamental lampposts that decorate the length of Passeig de Gràcia. Josep Vilaseca i Casanovas also used the image in 1888 when he designed the Arc del Triomf as the entrance to Barcelona's Universal Exhibition. Two bats sit on either side of the gate, watching over those arriving and leaving the exhibition.

Barcelona is, in fact, abundant with bats, who watch over us from any number of half-concealed perches. It takes close observation and sharp vision to spot them, as they inhabit a world high above and far from our own, but they crop up in unexpected nooks and crannies all over the city. ■



The bat was first deemed a protector of the Catalan people by Jaume I in the 13th century, and its likenesses can be found in places as diverse as the Arc del Triomf (left) or the Palau Güell (above).