

What's Out at Night



All animals need the same things - food, water and shelter - and your city yard often provides all three. Trees, shrubs, the space under your deck, your garage are used by all sorts of critters for shelter. Food sources include bird feeders, fruit and nectar, the goodies in your compost heap, insects and mice who breed in your back yard and the pet food you leave out on the back patio. Water sources range from dripping faucets to bird baths and fish ponds.

Yet, we rarely see these animals because they're active from dusk to dawn. Some are truly nocturnal and spend the daylight hours sleeping (like rats and flying squirrels), some are crepuscular (active at dawn and dusk like moths and nighthawks) and some emerge at dusk and forage until they're full and then go to sleep (raccoons and opossums are good examples).

The most prominent nighttime predator is the owl. Four species of owls call Missouri home: the Barred, the Great Horned, the Eastern Screech and the Barn. Four other species - the Snowy, the Long-eared, the Short-eared and the Northern Saw-whet - are occasional visitors. Owls are found in parks, cemeteries and golf courses all over the city. You may hear them calling in early winter.

Nighthawks are avian predators as well; you'll see them swooping around pursuing flying insects at dawn and dusk. You'll recognize them by the white blotches on their wings. These birds have adapted to the urban environment; they live in logged or burned areas of forests, fields and city parks. Nighthawks don't build nests; they lay their eggs on the bare ground (sand, gravel, leaves or rock). In the city, they may nest on flat gravel roofs.



Bats, yet another nighttime predator, LOVE bugs. A Little Brown Bat can eat 600 mosquitoes an hour and there are thousands of bats flying all night long. Bats drink water and do it on the fly, skimming over the surface, dipping down and gulping. Bats have been on earth since the time of the dinosaurs - when insects first emerged! The biggest native Missouri bat is the Hoary Bat which weighs in at .9 ounces; the smallest is the Little Brown weighing .3 ounces and standing 3 inches tall. Because it roosts in buildings, the Big Brown Bat is the most commonly sighted and may live as long as 20 years in the wild. During presentations at Starlight Theater, you may see bats swooping through the spotlights.

The omnivorous raccoons and opossums are found everywhere in the city, checking out backyards to see if there's pet food available to supplement their normal diets. Opossums, which are basically harmless, are also attracted to compost heaps and have been known to feast on slugs in Hosta beds. Raccoons should not be encouraged because they are extremely aggressive and can severely injure pets (and humans).

The shyest of the night mammals is the Flying Squirrel, though they should really be called the Gliding Squirrel. These charming creatures eat nuts, tree buds, berries,



mushrooms, moths and caterpillars - they positively adore wormy acorns. On chilly evenings, mom will spread her *patagium* (the loose flap of skin that allows her to glide) over the babies in the nest to keep them warm and cozy. If you have a bird feeding station and you live near a wooded area, stock the feeder with black oil sunflower seeds and peanuts and install a low watt night light nearby. Check the feeder several times every night and you might see a

flying squirrel.

Frogs are crepuscular, bug-eating machines. They range in size from the huge bullfrogs (which may grow to six inches) to the tiny cricket frog which is just $\frac{3}{4}$ inch long. You will hear frogs at night far more often than you see them, although only the males sing.. All frogs and toads lay their eggs in water; if you have a backyard pond, you may see egg masses and tadpoles in the spring.

Moths, the butterflies of the night, are most active at dusk and early evening. The largest and most beautiful moths in our area are the Sphinx moths. Because of their rapid wing movements and habit of hovering in front of flowers, these moths are often mistaken for hummingbirds; their antennae give them away. Lightning bugs illuminate the early evenings from June to September. In many species the adults don't eat at all. However, the larvae make up for it - eating everything from bugs to slugs - they inject digestive enzymes into the victim and suck out the liquefied parts.



Fireflies (which are really beetles) produce light through a process called bioluminescence. Amazingly, there is no heat generated in the process. Mosquitoes, the bane of our existence in summer evenings lay their eggs in standing water. They breed in bird baths, flower pot saucers, even gutters; luckily there are bats, frogs and nighthawks.

Take a nighttime prowling and look for some of these wonderful creatures in your back yard, your neighborhood or in one of the great parks in Kansas City.