

## Species with a Bad Rep By Cindy Williams

There are some animals that strike fear into the hearts of humans automatically – sharks come to mind, bears are pretty fierce, snakes can pack quite a punch, even the sight of a mouse scurrying across a room can cause an otherwise normal person to squeal with terror. Many of these fears have a basis in reality; after all if you come face to face with a Great White Shark you should logically be scared.

But there are some animals that have a terribly undeserved reputation. I work with one of them regularly and that's the poor, much maligned Virginia Opossum (pictured here are the group I most recently raised and released after their mom got hit by a car). I've written before about how beneficial they are to us, and I've noticed several memes getting passed around the last few years that tout their usefulness and general harmlessness. This month I got to work intimately with two other animal species who get a raw deal in the reputation department: the Big Brown Bat and the Striped Skunk.



Both species are rabies-vectored animals, which you might know means they are more likely than other species to carry the rabies virus in our area. Unfortunately some people think this means every bat or skunk they see is rabid – absolutely not true!!!! A quick search on our friend Google shows that this year (January – May) there were no confirmed cases of rabies in Missouri in any tested (i.e. suspected) animals. 100 animals were tested and a third of those tested were bats. These stats are from the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services. In 2008 a Missouri resident in Texas county died as a result of a bite from a rabid bat because he did not seek medical help or report the bite before symptoms started (a month after the bite). Before that you'd have to go back to 1959 to find a single human rabies infection. Last year a total of 1,836 animals were tested and 25 positive results were found, almost all in bats and skunks (17 and 5 respectively). Three bats were found in Jackson county, one in Buchanan county, one in Grundy county, and 1 cat was found to have rabies in Cass county. Those were the only positive results in our area in 2016. The five rabid skunks were all found in south central Missouri.

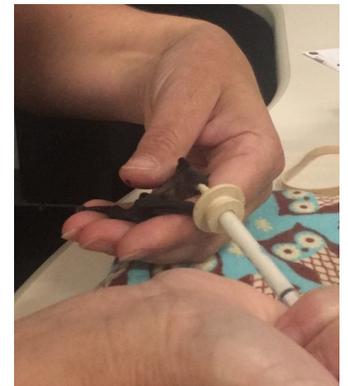
So now you have some facts to help you judge the relative risk of rabies in these two species and I hope you can agree that this risk, although real, is very, very low. Please do take precautions if you come in contact with these species. I got to "babysit" some baby skunks and baby bats while their foster parents were on vacation and it was a very special experience. Please note that these are babies who have been in rehab for a few weeks and have been handled and are used to humans – had they been adults I would have been wearing gloves to handle them. It is not ok to handle rabies-vectored adult animals (or any wildlife) without proper precautions!!

Let me just say that the skunks were absolutely adorable. They were quite vocal and very eager to be with me, their temporary foster mom. They are similar to squirrels in feeding technique (syringe with a nipple on the end) but much more affectionate (for lack of a better word) – they were very content just to be crawling around on my lap and in the grass around me. They never ventured very far away and had very sweet dispositions. Not necessarily what I expected! I know you are wondering about their smell, and believe me

that was a concern of mine. Baby skunks do contain the noxious fluid that they will use as adults to ward off predators, but they don't necessarily contain the ability to direct the spray yet. There is a musky scent about them and they can occasionally have "accidents" (especially during rough play with siblings or when startled) but I luckily did not experience that. Because they were already habituated to humans I was able to interact with them without startling them. The beauty of most mammal babies is that we can be very intimate with them while they are infants and still teach them to be frightened of humans before they are released. This comes naturally to most of them, and if they aren't afraid of humans (including foster parents) when they are released then the rehabilitator has not done his/her job properly. Adult skunks give plenty of warning before spraying and I got to see the beginning behavior in the oldest baby of the bunch – he started backing up to his siblings and stamping his little feet. It was so cute. He also ate his first bug while in my care – I was so proud!



The most surprising thing about caring for the baby bats was internalizing a fact I already knew, that bats are just very small mammals with wings. They drink formula from a syringe just like squirrels and skunks, everything is just much smaller. Smaller nipple, smaller syringe, smaller mouth. That can cause some difficulty when you're not used to it, but once you both get the hang of it they are very good eaters. They have to be – as adults they will be eating as many as 1,200 mosquitos (or similar sized insects) in an hour, or 8,000 – 10,000 per evening. That's a single bat. I don't know about you but I'd kind of like to have them around to do that.



Oh, and in case you're wondering, our bats do not drink blood. There are species of bats that will occasionally feed on the blood of larger mammals but they do not live in the US. They are found in Central and Southern America and the far southern regions of Mexico. They don't exactly suck the blood through their teeth as the movies would have you believe,



they bite the victim and lick off the blood. Their saliva contains anti-coagulating agents to keep the blood from clotting. Our home-grown bats are also much smaller than bats in other areas. The fruit bats (aka Flying Foxes) I was privileged to see in the wild in Australia were amazing. They average about 710 grams, which is about 1.5 pounds, with a wing span of over 3 feet. That's about the size of an average Barred Owl, and I saw hundreds of them hanging from two trees! They are also one of Australia's pollinators – they will eat fruit but prefer nectar and pollen. The babies I cared for this month were

under 10 grams (about the weight of a quarter or two) and will grow to be between 14 – 16 grams on average with a wing span of 11 – 13 inches. Big difference!

It may seem hard to believe, but they are quite sweet in their own way. They were hungry and desperate to feed just like other mammal babies, and quite happy when they were getting fed. The older male started eating mealworms in addition to formula while I was watching them which was pretty cool. Bats normally feed in the air as adults using sight and echolocation. When I would approach their habitat to feed them, I could hear them sending out signals trying to figure out where I was – it sounded like a mix between clicking and squeaking. Big Brown Bats are pretty common in our area, along with Little Brown Bats,

Red Bats, and Hoary Bats. There are fourteen bat species native to Missouri but not all are common to the Kansas City metro. We might also see the occasional Indiana, Gray or Eastern Pipistrelle. Bat populations in North America are being devastated by a disease called White Nose Syndrome (WNS), a fungal disease first identified in New York in 2006 and responsible for 5.7 million bat deaths by 2012. By 2016 it had spread to 29 US states, including unfortunately Missouri, and 5 Canadian provinces. WNS affects whole populations in their caves during hibernation and compromises their respiratory system and wings (leaving a visible white fungal infection around their nostrils, hence the name). So we need to keep helping our bat friends maintain their numbers and keep those pesky mosquitos in check!