

Effective Bat Imagery

Tips for Producing and Using Photographs of Bats for Communications and Outreach



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Tips for Taking and Selecting Bat Photography for Communications and Outreach

Introduction

Photographs can educate and engage people in conservation – two things that are of the utmost importance for animals like bats that have suffered devastating population declines in recent years. For photography to instill appreciation for bats as ecologically unique animals in need of conservation, viewers must empathize with and understand the challenges bats face.

White-nose syndrome (WNS) is a fungal disease that has decimated bat populations across North America since its discovery in 2007. The fungus attacks the bare skin of bats while they are vulnerable, disrupting their hibernation, affecting their seasonal behaviors and activity. When photographing bats, it is important that we are respectful of the existing guidelines that protect these vulnerable animals and do not exacerbate the impacts of WNS, spread the fungus, or introduce any new pathogens to bat populations.

Bats have long been painted as harbingers of disease and associated with scary movies and myths. Despite all the negative attention they have historically received, bats are irreplaceable in our environments, providing billions of dollars annually in pest control for U.S. agriculture.

When generating or choosing imagery for bat-related communications and outreach, it's important to showcase these unique and important animals in a favorable light.

Good quality wildlife photography can be used to educate and inspire, encourage conservation actions, elicit empathetic emotional responses, and encourage positive attitudes to and for bat species¹. These considerations are important when taking or selecting a photo to complement your message.

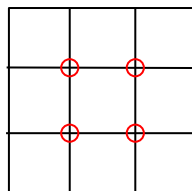
Whether you are creating and selecting images to highlight research findings and supplement guidance or selecting photographs for media or outreach, these tips will ensure you capture and feature high-quality photos of bats in a safe and respectful manner. These tips can also maximize the effectiveness of your conservation and public health messaging, advance behavioral objectives of target audiences and model responsible viewing and handling of bats. Please review the tips below as they pertain to you and your communication objectives.

General tips for everyone...

- **Prioritize safety.** When the opportunity for a photograph presents itself, the top priority is to ensure that it is safe for yourself and the animal to be captured in the image. Sometimes it is best not to take the photo. If you proceed with photography, consider these tips to capture and feature great shots that keep everyone safe.
- **Avoid unwanted noise.** An easy starting tip is to speak in quiet, low tones and minimize the duration and volume of noise when near bats or in their environment throughout the entire photography process. Quiet, low tones are better than whispers, which can produce ultrasonic sounds that irritate bats.
- **Protect privacy.** You have a responsibility to protect vulnerable bat populations and their habitat. Do not share photographs that include location data online or on social media. When taking photographs, especially on cellular devices, make sure you turn your geolocation off to prevent that data from being embedded within your picture. Turning off your location and refraining from sharing location information online helps to keep bats safe by not publicizing the places where they live. For those using cell phones, go into your privacy settings and then to your location services – from here you should be able to adjust how and when your camera app records your location data. Also, be aware of landmarks in your photo that might give away subtle location information. When reviewing your photos from a digital camera on a computer, you can open the information or properties settings for a photo and find the GPS details for the image, if there are any. Depending on the software or operating system you are using, you should have the ability to remove that information from the file.
- **Consider photos of bats without people.** You should never approach wild animals without the proper training, personal protective equipment (PPE), and medical preparations (i.e., vaccinations). The good news is that photos of bats without humans in the frame are preferred and have been shown to elicit a stronger reaction of compassion from an audience¹.
 - If for some reason a person is shown in a photo, make sure all featured persons have the proper PPE (gloves, face masks, etc.). Please see “Remember your PPE” section for more information on including PPE in your photography.
- **Choose one subject.** Research has shown that people react more compassionately to photos of individual bats rather than multiple bats¹. Presenting a large group of bats can be overwhelming to your audience, especially those who are wary of, or unfamiliar with, bats. This can cause levels of compassion to fade. There are some instances where journalists need photos of bat colonies for effective conservation communications, but we do not endorse putting yourself in close proximity to entire bat colonies and it is unlikely you would find yourself in that situation.
- **Frame your shot.** Try to make sure the background is free from any clutter, whether that be equipment or other people. You want the sole focus of the photograph to be the bat you are looking at and any interesting physical features of the bat you are

trying to showcase. Work within the setting you have! The background may not be perfect, but never move a bat to a different place for the sake of a photo – this is unsafe.

- **Wait for the right pose.** Keep in mind that a bat baring its teeth likely feels threatened, and the audience may perceive the resulting image as threatening. When possible, try to capture photos of bats with a relatable expression that won't come across as aggressive or scary: eyes open and jaws closed. Focusing on the features you want to highlight, like the eye(s), nose, and mouth of the bat, will result in a photo that really connects your audience to the subject. This can be hard to accomplish but be patient and plan to take more photos than you'll need! For examples of what to aim for and what to avoid, see Appendix A.
- **Remember the cute factor.** Everyone loves pictures of cute, little animals. Try your best to show how cute bats really are! Conservation is enticing to the public when the subjects are charismatic².
- **Take advantage of mobile opportunity.** If you realize you have a photo opportunity but don't have a camera on you, use your smart phone! You can still take good pictures by turning on your phone's high dynamic range (HDR), which allows for better definition and helps with light balance. You can also take burst photos by holding down the camera button to capture multiple pictures in just one instance, increasing your odds of getting a good one. As mentioned above, be aware of the location settings while using your phone to photograph.
- **Avoid unwanted product placement.** Beyond a clutter-free background, you can take extra steps to remove potential distractions from your photo. To avoid distracting labels and trademarked or company logos on field equipment or clothing, cover these unwanted elements by placing stickers with your own institution's name or logo over them. This allows for less background distraction and highlights your work in association with your organization. Another option is to photoshop out unwanted elements of the photo when editing.
- **Remember the rule of thirds.** If you consider the area of your photograph to be split into thirds horizontally and vertically, the intersections of those segments are the best focal points for your picture. The four red circles in the diagram below are the four options that you can choose from for where to focus on your subject. Many digital cameras and even smartphones have these grid settings available to use. Digital photos can easily be edited for layout later provided you capture the desired subject matter in the original image.



- **Practice, practice, practice.** Slow down and take your time while trying to get the perfect shot so you can adjust your techniques as you gain practice. Wildlife is exactly that: wild. This doesn't always make them the easiest subjects to photograph but

practicing patience will better your chances at capturing a great shot! Take more pictures than you think you need, too. You can always delete the unwanted shots later.

Further tips for biologists, researchers, and rehabilitators handling bats:

These tips provide additional considerations for different scenarios. Oftentimes the reason you are interacting with bats is for research or rehabilitation purposes, so photography may be an afterthought. Try to remember that you are a conduit that makes conservation accessible. You are in a position to show the world your incredible work - don't forget to snap a photo!

- **Remember your PPE.** Always make sure you are following all relevant safety procedures, including donning the proper PPE. This is standard practice to lessen the risk of harm to yourself and reduce the spread of pathogens to bats. If you are photographed handling a bat in the field, make sure you are following standard practice and showing off your PPE!
 - Since the public is likely to perceive masks as being necessary to protect people from bat-borne diseases, we recommend avoiding the use of these photos except with a very narrow and informed audience. If respiratory protection is being worn to protect bats, as is the case with guidance for COVID-19, then providing a caption that articulates mask use as a means of protecting bats can help convey that message and avoid reinforcing stigma against bat. For more information about public health messaging and bats please see [A One Health Message about Bats Increases Intentions to Follow Public Health Guidance on Bat Rabies.](#)
- **Handle with care.** Always wear gloves to handle bats. Do not hold bats by their outstretched wingtips or by their thumbs as this can cause harm or discomfort. Instead, use your hands to support and secure the body of the bat. Wearing cotton gloves or using a solid-colored piece of fabric or felt to hold the bat allows for dexterity, a clean and solid-colored backdrop, and safety for yourself and the bat. When handling bats, minimize noise, activity, and light levels to create a calmer environment for more amicable bat expressions. As with handling bats in a field setting, care should be taken to avoid unnecessary handling of bats. This will help reduce stress and avoid habituation to humans while they are in rehabilitative care.
- **Clean backdrop.** You may have the opportunity to manipulate your background setting when taking photos in a rehabilitation setting. The best-case scenario would be to have a solid-color background, preferably a neutral background, so that the focus is fully on the bat and the white-balance of the background doesn't outshine your subject.

Captioning your photos

- **Include the species name.** Not everyone has expertise when it comes to identifying bat species. Including both the scientific and common species name will help audiences not only connect the image to a specific species but also search for your image in the future. If you do not know the species name, reach out to local bat organizations and biologists to help you identify it.
- **Credit the photographer.** It is a best practice with any photography to credit the person behind the camera. As you likely know, photographs of bats are complex and difficult to achieve. It is important to acknowledge the hard work of others especially when you or your organization is benefitting from it.
- **Tell a story.** Whether you're trying to convey cuteness, or a tug-on-your-heartstrings type of story, consider your message while crafting the photo. The public loves to hear conservation success stories, but sometimes tugging at someone's heart strings can spur conservation action and interest as well. In a rehabilitation setting your audience may wrongly assume that these bats domesticated or similar to pets. You can use your photo and captions to correct those misconceptions and tell the story of that individual.
- **Give some detail.** Without sharing explicit location information, tell your audience some details about the incredibly cool animal you were lucky enough to see. Although we don't want the bats' location shared publicly, it is always a good idea to take note of the location and date that the photo was captured for record keeping purposes.
- **Sharing is caring.** We encourage you to contribute to conservation efforts by allowing others to share your image. A copyrighted image highly restricts the usability of your photos by conservation organizations.

With your help, we can all tell a more complete story about the struggles and successes within the field of bat conservation. Share their stories through your lens.

References

¹Straka, T.M., Grieving, H., and C.C. Voigt. (2020). "The effects of bat photographs on emotions, attitudes, intentions, and wildlife value orientations." *Human Dimensions of Wildlife*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10871209.2020.1864068>

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³Altenbach, J.S., and D.C. Dalton. (2009). Techniques for photographing bats. In T.H. Kunz and S. Parson's *Ecological and behavioral methods for the study of bats* (2nd ed., pp. 78-90). Johns Hopkins University Press.

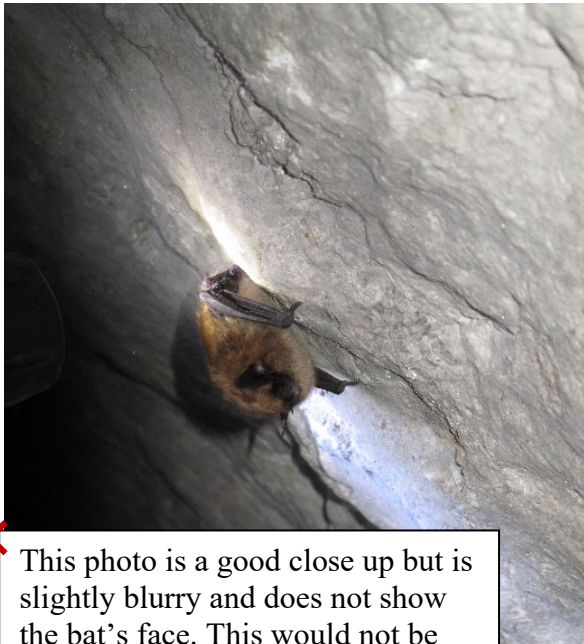
Appendix 1. Examples of bat photography, good and bad



This photo, while clear and focused, makes the bat featured look menacing.
Andrew King, USFWS.



This photo is also clear and focused and shows the bat with a calm expression.
Dave Thomas, Flickr Creative



This photo is a good close up but is slightly blurry and does not show the bat's face. This would not be engaging for an audience.
Gary Peebles, USFWS.



This photo has great coloration, focus, and light balance. By zooming in closer you can see the expression of the bat.
Ann Froschauer, USFWS.



✗ This photo has multiple things wrong. You should not hold a bat with bare hands. The bat looks uncomfortable and has an unpleasant expression. *Jennifer Krauel, Flickr Creative Commons.*



✓ This photo is great! You can hardly notice the person's gloved hand holding the bat. The bat has a great, amicable expression. *Ann Froschauer, USFWS.*



✗ This photo is okay. It was a great photo opportunity but may be confusing to an audience unfamiliar with bats because it is hard to locate the bat's facial features. *Larisa Bogardus, Bureau of Land Management.*



✓ This photo hit the mark. Similar to the photo on the left, it balanced the lighting well and got an up-close and focused shot. However, unlike the image on the left, this photo got a great angle of the bat's face. *Ann Froschauer, USFWS.*