

Bats are Beautiful (by Mrs Sproule - with help from Mr Sproule)

The four bats were swooping and fluttering about in the early dusk. Basil, Betsy, Benni and Beatrice were competing to see who could catch the most insects.

They were horseshoe bats, larger than their cousins, the pipistrelles. They looked like small flying foxes with twitchy noses and long tongues to lap up insects. And they were very clever - and beautiful.

The sound waves they sent out were a sort of navigation system. It helped them not to fly into trees. The higher frequency signals allowed them to detect bugs, flies, moths and mosquitoes and know exactly what was being caught.

Basil was, once again, the winner with a nice collection of juicy flies and mosquitoes. He hung upside down in the church tower and chatted to Beatrice.

“You know, I’ve often wondered why humans use the expression ‘as blind as a bat’. Bats can see perfectly well - just differently! Why, we use high frequency signals - up to 30,000 cycles per second!”

Beatrice agreed that bats had certain powers that humans didn’t. When you thought about it, you could say these were super powers!

“Yes, and some humans think we pal around with vampires,” said Benni, flicking out his tongue to catch a passing fly.

“Vampires! Why would they think that?” asked Betsy who had just flown in. “Vampires are nasty. Bats are nice!”

“Don’t know. Humans are weird,” answered Benni, swaying back and forth.

Suddenly Brinkley, the oldest and wisest bat, swooped into the tower. “Hello, young bats! Caught any nice, juicy insects tonight?”

“Yes, lots!” said Basil. “And I’m off again to catch some more!” He swooped past the older bat out into the night sky.

“No moths, though,” said Beatrice. “They’re a bit too clever, tonight.”

Beatrice was right. The moths, knowing that they were the bats' favourite food, had a system to avoid being eaten. They would close their wings and drop out of sight. The bats would then fly over them and miss out on a tasty meal.

But sometimes the moths weren't so lucky and they would get eaten. That was why Mr and Mrs Jenkins had installed a bat repellent device, which they called a "zapper", to scare them off. The couple liked moths, especially the Emperor, the Oak Eggar and the Elephant Hawk moth and they didn't like seeing them disappearing into the bats' mouths and stomachs.

Besides, Mr Jenkins had a strange idea that bats got into your hair. It was odd because he didn't have any hair!

The next day Brinkley came to warn the other bats about this zapper. It would mess with their echo-location, he said. The ultrasound device was cancelling out the sound waves the bats were sending and totally scrambling their navigation system.

"So be careful! Basil's already flown into a tree! This device's signals cancelled out his high-frequency signals!

"Oh dear!," said Betsy. "He won't be catching any flies for awhile."

"Well, as you know, it is making him go 'blind'."

"Blind as a bat?" joked Benni, but the others didn't find that very funny.

"This is terrible!" shrieked Beatrice. She had just flown back from looking for insects in the Jenkins' garden but couldn't find any. Her echo-location wasn't working and she couldn't identify any insect worth eating. Her wings were quivering and she was still a bit shaky.

"But what are we going to do about it?" asked Betsy.

"We've got to eat!" said Beatrice "and this is the best garden around!" The bats were really worried.

"Well, I have a plan," said Brinkley. "We've got to let the humans know how useful bats are."

“How do we do that?” asked Basil who had just flown in, still very groggy from his accident with the tree.

“I’ve heard them complain about the mosquitoes in their garden,” continued Brinkley. “Well, we eat mosquitoes.”

“You mean, if we don’t eat mosquitoes, they’ll be attacked and bitten?” asked Benni.

“Good!” said Basil. He was still feeling grumpy.

Brinkley revealed his plan. “We could fly into next door’s garden and only eat their mosquitoes. Then the humans in our garden will realise how much they miss us - because they’ll be bitten and get all itchy - and want us back.”

“But,” he continued, looking at each bat in turn. “We must not eat any moths. No matter how tasty.”

“Yes, that makes sense,” agreed Beatrice. “The humans seem to like moths, I heard them saying so. My radar picked it up.”

“Correct!” said Brinkley. “Only eat mosquitoes, not moths. To show them how useful we are! And how nice we are to moths.”

“But tonight,” Betsy had to check to make sure she got it right, “we fly into their neighbours’ garden and only eat their mosquitoes?”

“That will show the humans in our garden just how itchy they can get when their mosquitoes start eating them. I’m going to enjoy this!” said Basil as he swooped away.

Well, it happened as the bats thought. That evening Mr and Mrs Jenkins were out in their garden, under the outdoor light, admiring the moths fluttering past, landing on the flowers, showing their pretty wings. But they weren’t enjoying themselves because they were being bitten all over by mosquitoes!

They checked with their neighbours but, no, the Simpsons weren’t being bitten at all. “It’s the bats, you see,” said Mr Simpson. Ever since they arrived we’ve been mosquito-free!”

“Yes,” agreed Mrs Simpson. “Bats eat mosquitoes, you see. They’re extremely useful that way. Did you know that one bat can eat up to a thousand mosquitoes in one hour!”

The Jenkins decided the only thing they could do, to enjoy their evenings in the garden, was to turn their bat zapper off. It was a choice between moths or mosquitoes.

“Perhaps they won’t eat our lovely moths,” hoped Mrs Jenkins.

And the bats didn’t. The zapper was turned off. The bats came back, enjoyed hunting for insects, flies and, of course, mosquitoes. They followed Brinkley’s advice not to eat moths.

“No problem,” said Beatrice. “They usually drop out of sight anyway, when they see us.”

But Basil couldn’t resist one last juicy moth. He used his radar to detect one coming towards him. He swooped over it, he swooped under it. His tongue flicked out - squish!

The Jenkins saw what had happened - a lovely Emperor moth! On went the zapper.

Basil’s radar gave out. Bang! Into the tree he flew.