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Veterinarian operates on bat wings: Microsurgery saves the lives of endangered species

By Jane Palmer - Santa Cruz Sentinel

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SANTA CRUZ -- Kerrin Hoban slid the needle-sized pin into the elbow, scooted it down the length of the barely visible radius and incised the bead-like joint.

This, Hoban said, is how you fix the wing of a bat.

"I take the metal stylette out of a spinal needle and use that as a teeny, weeny pin and put it in the teeny, weeny wing," Hoban said.

Though Hoban was demonstrating the procedure on a carefully preserved bat skeleton, it's a surgery she performed just weeks earlier. For more than a decade, Hoban has performed a dozen of these "microsurgeries" on bats at the Harbor Veterinary Hospital on Soquel Avenue, as well as treating her stable of cats and dogs.

"There are not very many of us who treat bats," said Hoban, who taught herself how to operate on bats on a broken-winged creature brought to her in 1998.

Just 10 days ago Hoban removed the pin from the wing of her latest patient, a fluffy, thumb-sized Mexican free-tailed bat called Roddie. Roddie now lives with Karen Moreno, a batophile and member of the California Bat Conservation Fund, a nonprofit dedicated to the preservation of California's shrinking bat populations.

Roddie rests in the palm of Moreno's palm eating a snack of worms to wash down his pain medications. Although his face is only the size of a dime and his eyes mere pinpricks, his expression is one of pure suspicion.

"He is nervous," Moreno said. "Smile Roddie. Would you like another worm?"

Moreno, who wears a large bat pendant and has a house full of bat memorabilia, nurtures Roddie as if he were a newborn infant.

"He is such a sweetheart," she cooed.

Unable to fly again, Roddie will live out his days under Moreno's home -- a luxury hotel for bats. In the back room is a cage that recently housed 50 homeless bats. The size of a large laundry room, the grid-like cage allows ample room for the bats to fly and numerous rungs for the bats to hang off.

"They are the most wonderful, gentle creatures," said Moreno, who estimates she has rehabilitated "hundreds" of bats in the past 12 years. When a bat is given to her with a broken wing, she knows just where to take it.

Bat surgery

Of all the bats that Hoban has operated on, however, only one has recovered its flight and been re-released into the wild. To survive, bats need to swoop down on insects and capture them in order to eat, she said.

"So they have to be flying really well," Hoban said. "It is not like a raccoon that can limp around on three legs."

Even "knocking out" such a small creature is a challenge, said Hoban. Initially, Hoban places the tiny

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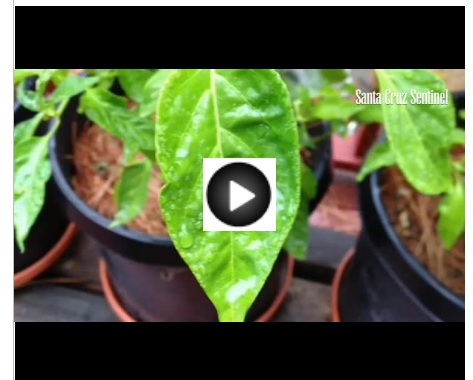
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creatures in a Ziploc bag and funnels the anesthetic in with a nozzle.

"When they are out we put a little tiny face mask on their little tiny face," Hoban said. Once the mask is firmly in place over the bat's nose, Hoban is able to perform the surgery.

Hoban can't rely on X-rays to guide her work as bat skeletons are so light, weighing less than a nickel. The powerful X-rays would burn straight through the bone, she said. Ideally, Hoban would use a mammogram, but she lacks the resources to buy one.

"I do this for free," Hoban said. "The bats don't have any money."

The bats are typically brought to Hoban by members of the Native Animal Rescue or the California Bat Conservation Fund. Many of the bats are found by the side of the road, having been struck by the antennae of car radios, Hoban said.

When Hoban faced her first surgery in 1998, she was as nervous as the bat, she said. "But he was really hurt, and I thought I would try it because I wanted to help the little guy," Hoban said.

Her expectations of the surgery are low, Hoban said. The first two bats she operated on in 1998, Chomper and Clark, both died.

"We are just thrilled when they heal," Hoban said. "They are really amazing and adorable little animals."

Life after surgery

Although Roddie's days of munching mosquitoes are over, he will become a regular visitor to schools, community centers and churches. Members of the California Bat Conservation Fund regularly take the bats on educational visits.

"Kids absolutely love bats once they learn about them," Moreno said. The fund hopes that the visits will help promote bat awareness and dispel the common myths that surround the creatures.

"Most people think that bats are vampire bats and suck blood," Moreno said. "That is why we stress education."

Right now bats need all the help they can get, Moreno said. During the last 20 years, approximately 80 percent of the country's bat population has been lost, according to the Bat Conservation Fund.

One of the main reasons for the creature's demise has been the increased use of pesticides in commercial agriculture, according to the Bat Fund. Insects that have been exposed to heavy doses of pesticides are the bat's bread and butter. Once these pesticides accumulate in the bats tissues, however, the bats grow weaker and eventually die.

A significant number of deaths occur when bat habitats are destroyed, according to the Bat Fund. People who fear bats as a source of disease demolish the mammal's homes.

"That is why we do our best to educate people about these wonderful little critters," Moreno said.

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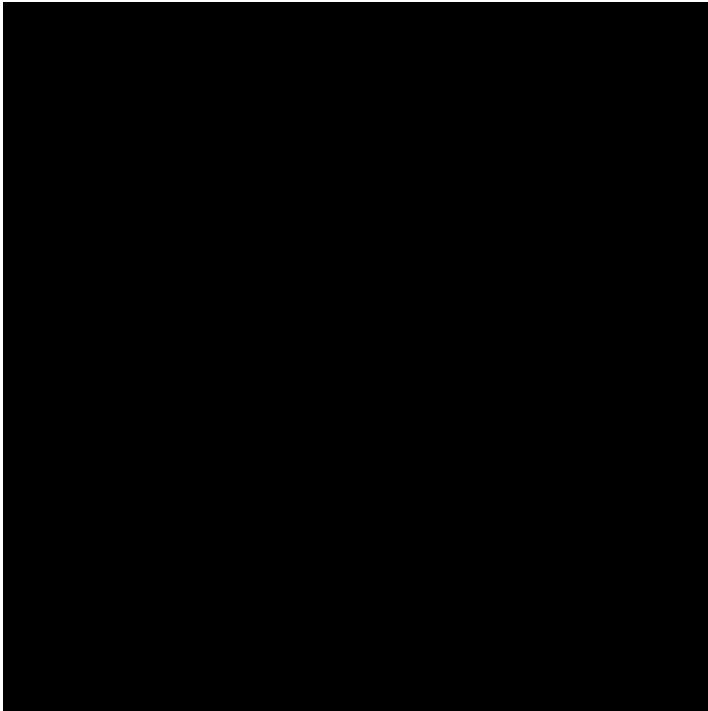
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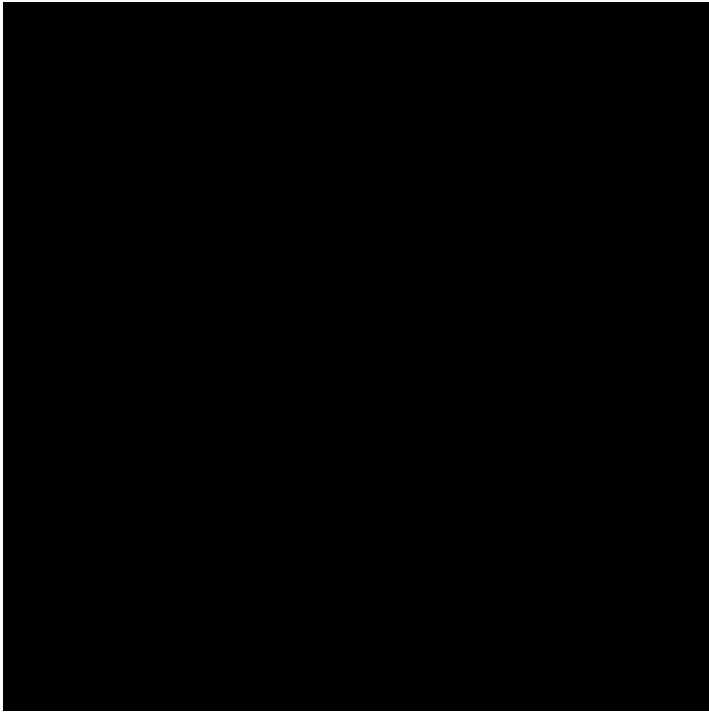


Bats eat insects, including many damaging agricultural pests. A single brown bat can eat up to 1,000 mosquito-sized insects in a single hour.



Bats are vital pollinators and essential dispersers of plant seeds.

If you find an injured bat



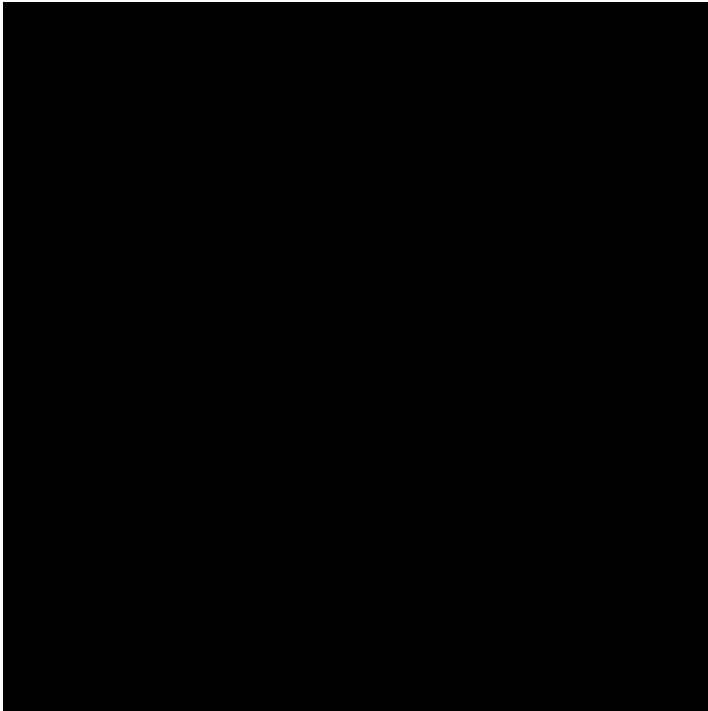
Do not pick it up.



Gently scoop the animal into a small container (like a shoe box) using a cloth or piece of paper.

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Put a soft cloth into the box to give the bat something to cling to.



Immediately contact the California bat conservation fund, www.californiabats.com.

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