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Nighttime neighbors: UGA students build homes for bats in Athens

Sofi Gratas | Staff Writer Jul 3, 2018



Students help create bat houses as part of the "Build It and They Will Come" project led by Kristen Lear. The houses will be placed at the University of Georgia campus by the end of summer.

Rebecca Wright

When night falls on the University of Georgia campus, nocturnal, winged creatures come out of their hiding spots to feed and socialize, not unlike humans.

“There is that misunderstanding often among the public, of that fear of bats,” said Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources Ph.D. candidate Kristen Lear. “A lot of people just don’t know that they are around, or they are afraid of them.”

That’s why Lear is taking on a bat housing project, called “Build It and They Will Come,” that is focused on increasing understanding of bats among the Athens community, while providing a safe nesting place for the bat population to grow.



Before the end of the summer, Lear hopes to have bat houses installed throughout UGA properties for the four species of bats that commonly inhabit the area. The bats will need a home during the roosting season this fall, and although they already inhabit some structures around campus, bat houses will be a safer alternative to keep bats safe from displacement.

Currently, Lake Herrick in Oconee Forest Park and UGArden have been identified as locations for two houses each. Lear’s team is planning on placing more in Lumpkin Woods.



Bats are photographed in a bat house.

Courtesy Kristen Lear

Lear and her team of three other Ph.D. students, along with faculty sponsor Dr. Jeffrey Hepinstall-Cymerman, began project development earlier this year after receiving an Office of Sustainability grant in fall of 2017. The grant provides nearly \$5,000 and covers personnel, equipment and installation costs.

According to Lear, the most important aspects of the project include data collection, having a positive ecological impact and promoting environmental education. During the first portion of the project, Girl Scout troops and the UGA chapter of the Wildlife Society helped construct bat houses by hand.

“That was a hands-on experience for them to learn how to build bat houses, and to also learn about why bats are important and how we can help them around the community,” Lear said.

Campus bat caves

Bat species in Athens include Big Brown Bats, Mexican Free-tailed Bats, Evening Bats and Little Brown bats. All of these species have been recorded to succeed in urban environments, commonly inhabiting roosting boxes and other structures.

Around Sanford Stadium, Lear has documented Mexican Free-tailed Bats living in wall cracks. Libraries on campus also act as popular spots for bats who feast on insects flying around the spherical lights.

“I’ve seen the bats utilize portions of campus infrastructure in ways that I find to be pretty novel,” said Micah Miles, a Ph.D. student in the Integrative Conservation program.

While Lear is the self-proclaimed “bat lady,” Miles considers herself the outreach specialist of the bat house project. Miles typically works in the Warnell Herpetology Laboratory with reptiles and amphibians. Her interest in urban ecology and environmental education led her to join Lear’s work.



Girl Scouts help create bat houses as part of the "Build It and They Will Come" project led by Kristen Lear. The houses will be placed around the University of Georgia campus by the end of summer.

Courtesy Kristen Lear

The team has built 15 boxes of two different types – 10 standard models and 5 ‘rocket box’ designs – to accommodate different species. The boxes might appear small, but will be able to fit between 150-300 bats depending on the design. Each house will be mounted on top of a steel pole set in concrete, 18 feet off the ground.

According to the grant proposal, each site will have three houses – giving the bats a choice to move around, especially when different species require different temperatures.

Data collection is a major part of the project and its outcomes, as Lear and her team will be monitoring the incoming bats and providing said data to other university programs.

Spreading wings and awareness

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Public opinion is a large variable in this project. Miles plans to work with Broderick Flanigan, Athens-based artist, to create natural graffiti to honor the bats in town.

The art project will be made of a mixture containing moss and yogurt, painted onto walls. Once applied, the moss will grow to create a living, educational image. Plans are still in the preliminary stages and funding has not yet been determined, but Flanigan has expressed interest in completing the project once all necessary materials have been provided.

Although the proposal says the houses will require minimal maintenance, once Lear, Miles and the rest of the team graduate, Wildlife Ecology and Management professor Dr. Steven Castleberry and the Warnell chapter of The Wildlife Society will take over “yearly maintenance and monitoring.”

Bats will also be monitored through a video feed – Lear plans on installing infrared “spy cameras” inside some of the bat boxes to film colony behavior, she said.

Lear plans to post the videos on the project website so the public can become more familiar with bats, as well as allow UGA courses to use them as educational resources.



Houses for bats have been made by University of Georgia students as part of the "Build It and They Will Come" project.

Courtesy Kristen Lear

Bats provide benefits to their surrounding environments, according to the grant proposal, so watching the bats assist in controlling bug populations could be beneficial in encouraging the public to become more supportive and involved in the project.

“When people feel like the animal is a threat to them, or a threat to the situation, then they’re generally just going to eradicate it and not give a concern for the conservation issues or for the ecosystem around them,” Miles said. “This project is continuing, even though you put the houses up, it doesn't stop there.”



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