

Exercise caution around bats

SPECIAL TO THE DAILY NEWS

There's no denying that bats are creepy. One glimpse of them darting across the night sky is enough to send chills up and down your spine and make you run for cover.

Maybe people are naturally prone to fear bats, or maybe they've been featured in one too many horror movies. Whatever the reason, bats certainly have a bad reputation. But is the bad rap warranted?

Contrary to what you may think, bats are actually useful by helping to control the population of one of summer's most dreaded insects: pesky mosquitoes! And, like most animals, bats would much rather stay away from people, but they do sometimes find their way into our homes, and that's when we need to be cautious.

While bats aren't all bad, they are

among the most common animals in Michigan to transmit rabies, a disease that is fatal if untreated. So while fear isn't warranted, caution is.

Be sure to bat-proof your home by replacing any loose soffits, flashings, eaves and siding. Also, cover roof vents with screens, make sure all doors shut tightly with no gaps, and that window screens are not damaged or torn.

If you are bitten by a bat, contact your doctor right away. If a bite does occur; or if a bat is found near a sleeping person, an unattended child, or a mentally impaired or intoxicated person; it should be captured because it may need to be tested for rabies. Capturing a bat isn't as difficult as you may think. First, you'll need to gather a few items: A pair of gloves (leather work gloves are ideal), a small box or coffee can, a piece of cardboard and tape. When the bat lands, approach it slowly. Place the box or cof-

fee can over the bat and slide the cardboard under the container to trap the bat inside. Then, tape the cardboard securely to the container. Keep in mind that in order to be tested, a bat's head must be kept intact, so hitting it with any type of object, like a tennis racket, is not advised. To see a video demonstration on safe bat capture, visit www.mmdhd.org.

Once you have captured the bat, contact the Mid-Michigan District Health Department at (989) 831-3615 in Montcalm County to find out if the bat needs to be tested.

Bats, skunks, foxes, and unvaccinated cats and dogs are all likely rabies carriers. To help protect yourself and loved ones from rabies, avoid approaching or touching any wild or stray animal. And remember, if you are bitten by a bat or other wild or stray animal, contact your health care provider.