

Bat Buddies Project

A Sarasota County 4-H Club Aims to Help a Misunderstood Species

by Madison Chapman

Editor's Note: Deborah Chapman is the leader of the Sarasota County environmental science 4-H club known as the Reef Rovers. Her daughters, Madison (age 14) and Raven (age 11), became interested in bats when a colony invaded a home in their neighborhood. This led them to research bats, and, when they learned of their plight, they convinced their fellow Reef Rover club members to implement the Bat Buddies project to help these native mammals. The Reef Rovers have also participated in other community service initiatives, such as storm drain markings, beach clean-ups, exotic removals, and native plantings. Madison and Raven were honored in 2007 with the Sarasota County Youth Conservation Award for their environmental efforts. And in the fall of '07, they were recipients of the Sarasota County 4-H Citizenship Award. Following is an explanation of the program written by Madison.



Deborah, Madison, and Raven Chapman

Members of the Sarasota County 4-H Reef Rovers club have gone batty. Over the last year, they have donated bat houses to various public parks, preserves, schools, and community centers throughout Sarasota and Manatee counties. The objective of their Bat Buddies program is to provide an alternative habitat for bats as well as increase public awareness about the ecological value of these native mammals.

While the Reef Rovers have participated in a variety of marine biology and conservation programs, including beach cleanups, native plantings, and storm drain markings, "They were eager to get involved with something wildlife-oriented," club leader Deborah Chapman explains.

Bats are the most important natural controller of night-flying insects, with the average bat consuming over 3,000 insects per night. However, bats are disappearing at alarming rates due to the destruction of their habitats, which primarily are dead trees. Wooden bat-house boxes mounted high on posts offer safe, alternative roosts.

The Bat Buddies project is funded by a grant from the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program (sarasotabay.org). While some of the bat houses were purchased from conservation groups, the students built, stained, and calked many of the bat houses themselves. And, with the help of a few dads, they mounted them on posts at 10 different locations: Pocono Trail in Nokomis, Curry Creek Preserve in Venice, Crowley Museum and the Cortez Schoolhouse in Manatee County, Twin Lakes Park & Longwood Run Park in Sarasota, the Sarasota Community Garden, and the Girl Scout Regional Headquarters. Pine View School in Osprey also received a bat house from the Reef Rovers. "We've had a bat infestation in several of our buildings, and this will provide a wonderful alternative to keep them on campus but away from our school buildings and our students," environmental science teacher Wallace "Spike" Black explains.



Reef Rovers installing first bat house at Longwood Park

The Reef Rovers are particularly excited about their bat house donation to the Humane Society of Sarasota County. Why? If bats decide to colonize the bat house there, it will be great for both the bats and the dogs, because bats eat mosquitoes and mosquitoes can transfer heartworm, a dangerous disease, to dogs. Also, the Education Department of the humane society has incorporated bat conservation into the curriculum of their summer camps and youth programs.

Though the Reef Rovers do not plan to put up any more bat houses, they continue to give educational presentations about bats at elementary schools, and they monitor their 10 bat houses for colonization. And they are proud to confirm a colony already at Twin Lakes Park. To learn more about bats or to get your own bat house, visit www.batcon.org or www.floridabats.org.