

Following the Flowers

Most bats are insect eaters, but a few eat nectar and fruit. The lesser long-nosed bat is one of them. This bat has a long thin face that is just right for poking its nose inside a large flower. At the bottom of the flower is a sweet juice called nectar, this bat's favorite food. As it goes from plant to plant, the lesser long-nosed bat carries pollen with it. The plants need this pollen in order to make seeds, so the plant and the bat help each other.

Lesser long-nosed bats spend the winter in Mexico. In the spring they follow the flowers north to the United States. Different kinds of cactus bloom at different times, so there is always food for the bats. Once they reach the U. S. they feed on the nectar from the large white saguaro cactus flowers. These flowers open at night and close the next day. The flowers face the sky and are high on the tips of the cactus stem and arms. The white color high in the sky is easy for the bats to see. So that old saying "blind as a bat" is not true—bats can see, even at night.

About the time the saguaros are finished blooming, the agave plants start to bloom. Agaves also place their flowers as high as they can and wait for the bats to come. Agave blossoms feed the bats all the way back to Mexico during their fall migration.

Bat numbers have dropped sharply in the last hundred years. Scientists believe that loss of good roosting sites and loss of the right kind of food and being disturbed during hibernation are some of the reasons. The lesser long-nosed bat is endangered, and many people are working to save this very important animal.

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