

The Stars at Night, Are Big and Bright, Deep in the Heart of Texas, and Often Accompanied by Bats

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By Susan Dunn

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by Bats by Susan Dunn, MA, The EQ Coach**

Ooops. Oh those engineers. When they reconstructed the Congress Avenue Bridge in Austin, Texas in 1980, they inadvertently created a unique ECO-TOURISM DESTINATION, and an experience not available many places in the world. The bridge was evidently the perfect roosting place for bats and now houses the largest urban bat colony in North America. Yes, not only does Texas have the Alamo, it's very batty! The largest bat colony in the world is also near San Antonio (about 60 miles from Austin).

Who knew?

A huge colony roosts under this bridge in downtown Austin, and when they egress of a summer night to go out and hunt for food, it is a sight to behold. I have taken visitors of all ages to see the spectacle and even the teenagers (you know how hard they are to impress, or admit it) sat spellbound. It's just creepy enough. For driving directions and map, go here:
http://www.batcon.org/discover/congress_map_outoftowners.html .

Popular? It's estimated that over 100,000 people come to see the bats fly out every year, generating a healthy hunk of change for the city of Austin.

The spectacle has all the elements of a good watch - mystery, a bit of the creeps, expect-TA-shun, and results that don't disappoint. Tension builds as dusk falls and all eyes turn to the bridge, waiting. Then you see one bat and the crowd cheers, then another, then a million. Silently they head out into the night and to think of where all those bats are heading - well, I often saw them dive-bombing my swimming pool at night.

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Of course the City had to do some educating when the public became, um, upset about all the 1.5 million Mexican free-tailed bats that migrate from Mexico to call the bridge their home from mid-March to early November. I'd call that "wintering in Texas," but, okay, it's a migration.

Do we love bats? Well, we don't like to touch them - no joke, don't ever mess with a bat. But we must appreciate the fact that those bats heading out across Austin can each eat 600 mosquitoes in an hour and won't poison the environment. They also pollinate plants. (Other favorites include many crop pests such as cutworms, cucumber beetles, and corn borer moths.) 600 mosquitoes x 1.5 million bats x 8 night hours? You do the math! For a quickie on bat lore, go here: <http://www.nps.gov/wica/bats.htm> .

Might you get rabies? According to the National Park Service, only 10 humans have contracted rabies from bats in more than 30 years. Most people who do die of rabies contract it from our much better friend, the dog. In the Austin-area, bat rich as it is, there have been no recorded human cases of bat-transmitted rabies.

It sort of adds to the excitement of the adventure, but when you're sitting there looking up, how would you catch one? If one falls to the ground, it is probably injured or sick, and your animal-lore in general will tell you to leave any wild animal alone. In this case, just get away. And if you like to grub around under the bridge, assuming you could, well, haven't you heard about guano? Ick!

According to experts, bats are rarely aggressive, even when injured, and do we appreciate them ecologically? I haven't checked, but I doubt if you're swatting a lot of mosquitoes as you sit there watching.

And, hey, it could happen anywhere. The BCI warns, "Persons who wake up with a bat in the same room [now where might that be?] where they have been sleeping are advised to submit it for testing, especially if the bat is unable to fly or seems weak."

Now wouldn't you rather have the bats out in the open heading for insects than in a room with you!

Yes, you would.

I'll throw my personal experience in here. Incredibly my son and I were draped around a statue across from the Alamo trying to get a good view of some president who was arriving, when a bat torpedoed into the statue and fell, stunned, at our feet. While mothers and kids screamed, the former in fear, and the latter in delight, the poor bat just flailed around. You could've picked it up with gloves, but we just walked away. It was unable to fly, and uninterested in humans.

But let me stress again, there's no heroism involved; the bats coming from the bridge are far away and they're on a mission. You might suggest to thrill the older children, if you're that type, that they are going to turn your way, but they have a plan and I guess they're herd animals. What would you do anyway? Whistle?

One way you can view them is from a cruise on Capital Cruise Boats (<http://www.capitalcruises.com/html/bat.htm>) or Lone Star River Boats.

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Another way is sitting on the outside bat-viewing decks of TGI Friday's in the Radisson Hotel on Town Lake, and the Shoreline Bar & Grill restaurant in the Hyatt-Regency Austin hotel. If I bring adults, we usually enjoy a gourmet meal at the latter. If I bring kids or teens, TGI Fridays is the place.

When do they leave? Depends on time of year, weather conditions, colony size and bat mood. But of course there's a Bat Hot Line to tell you -- 512-416-5700 (Category 3636). BCI suggests mid-August as the best time, as the new pups are making their first sojourns out to hunt with their moms. Best viewing months in general are July and August.

You can also bring blankets and picnic baskets and watch from the Austin American-Statesman's Bat Observation Center, located at the southeast corner of the bridge. It offers educational kiosks and BCI "interpreters" on summer weekends, Thursday through Sunday, June through August.

There are several lots where you can park FREE, no refreshment stands, no public restrooms. Are you getting the picture? That you can have a fun and educational outing that doesn't cost A CENT? Part of the fun of the excursion is the "old timey" feeling.

Spending my summers in Texas each year in a town about 60 miles northeast of Austin, our major

entertainment in the evening was to drag a quilt outside on the front lawn and lie down and look at the stars ("The stars at night, are big and bright, clap clap clap clap...). Well, same deal here - the quilt, the picnic basket, nature's own show, and no money changing hands. Very novel these days and the kids won't fail to miss that something's very different. This is no Disney World.

Incidentally, to the Chinese, bats are symbols of good luck and happiness. They symbolize health, long life, prosperity, love of virtue, and natural death.

Check out here (http://www.batcon.org/discover_xguide.html) for other bat observing locations nearby and ya'll come, y'hear? You won't see something like this very often.

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Now You Can Play Texas Hold 'em At An Online Casino

By Kevin Rose

Looking to play an action-packed game of Texas Hold Em anytime day or night? Keep your car in the garage and hop on the Internet for a quick trip to an online casino.

Texas Hold Em is sweeping the world and you can find thousands of games going on at nearly any

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online casino. Playing Texas Hold Em online is actually better than playing at a physical casino. Not only do you avoid the expense of travelling to a casino, but you avoid the crowds, the distractions, and the cigarette smoke in your eyes from the player sitting next to you.

But that's all you'll avoid because playing Texas Hold Em at an online casino comes with all of the thrills and some pretty big pots.

Not only can you find an open seat anytime that you want one, but many of the top online casinos sponsor Texas Hold Em tournaments where the prize money can get pretty big.

The rules for playing Texas Hold Em online are pretty much the same as they are in physical casinos, but you should always check for casino-specific variations just to be safe.

If you are not an experienced Texas Hold Em player, you can get wiped out pretty quickly if you're seated at an online casino table with the "big boys". That's why many online casinos offer \$.50-\$1.00 Low Limit Texas Hold Em online poker games. With stakes that low you can afford to make mistakes while you hone your strategy without losing a bundle.

Once your skill levels improve you can move on to \$10 limit games where you'll be matched against more skilled players but you won't have to be worried about being clobbered by the high rollers who are playing online No-Limit Texas Hold Em.

Just because your bankroll isn't as big as you wish it was, you can still take advantage on the online casino Texas Hold Em tournament action by looking for \$10 Limit Sit-n-Go Tournaments which are limited to 10 players at a time.

Once you are confident of your abilities to play Texas Hold Em at the smaller online casino games, you can try your luck sitting down to play at the No Limit Texas Hold Em table with a buy-in as low as \$50. And when you really reach the top you can even play at multiple Texas Hold Em tables at the same time. That's something that you can only do at an online casino!

With many online casinos offering first-time Texas Hold Em players financial incentives like new player bonus dollars and match-play credits, it just makes sense to treat yourself to an online game of Texas Hold Em instead of packing up the family and heading out to some resort casino where you'll spend hundreds of dollars just on room and meals. Texas Hold Em and online casinos --- it's a sure thing.

Kevin Rose is an author and consultant for The 10 Best Online Casinos

, and has many years of experience in online gambling.

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