

Tampa may be on the move, but the bats under a busy Riverwalk bridge are not

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Even in a city coming into its own, things don't always go as planned. Take the bats, for instance.

In 2017, [city officials](#) became concerned about a bridge along the increasingly popular Riverwalk—one of several car-traffic bridges that people pass under while strolling, running, or partying on Tampa's 2.6-mile waterside path along the Hillsborough River.

Under the Fortune Taylor Bridge between Water Works Park and the Straz Center for the Performing Arts, the bridge's concrete underpinnings over the water are home to thousands of bats, according to an estimate by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission—likely Mexican or Brazilian free-tailed bats. When it's dark out, bats can sometimes be seen over the water.

Bat life is further evidenced by brown streaks of bat guano down the concrete supports, made glossy from the wings of the insects they eat. Pedestrians passing through probably notice a strong and distinctive odor that comes from bat urine.

The city wondered: Would the swooping presence of bats scare pedestrians?

"They don't want people to be intimidated with bats flying. There was never really a [safety issue](#), but if somebody freaks out or has a phobia of it, we just try to make everybody happy," said Robin Nigh, the city's manager of arts and cultural affairs. "We don't want to startle or make anyone in the public feel uncomfortable, even though (the bats) are not interested in people."

That's where Steve Barlow, wildlife biologist and pilot with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, came in. Barlow, who designed the renowned bat houses at the University of Florida in Gainesville, built one big enough for 4,000 bats for Tampa. The [city](#) installed it just across the river from the bridge, perched up high in a grassy area at the north edge of Julian B. Lane Riverfront Park. Artist Lynn Manos Page decorated the exterior

for free, in shades of blue with dark bats on it, making it not only potential bat real estate but public art, too.

It was installed in 2018. After four years, the bats appears to be uninterested. Upon recent inspection, Nigh could find little evidence of occupancy.

"The bats like the bridge," said Nigh. "Even though (the bat house) is waterfront property too, they like the bridge."

A fact about bats: They save American farmers billions of dollars annually in [pest control](#) by eating insects, and benefit the lumber industry in forest ecosystems, according to the U.S. Geological Survey. Their diet includes those irksome mosquitoes.

"They're a great benefit," said Barlow. "Most of us don't enjoy insects flying around our heads. They eat huge quantities every night."

Also, bats rarely bite except in self-defense if handled. Do not handle bats.

Barlow wonders if trees around the bat house, which can interfere with flight and the sunlight that warms them, might be troublesome. Bats are warm-blooded, roost communally and "sort of snuggle, if you will," to keep warm, he said.

He suspects some bats may be popping into the bat house to take breaks or that "bachelor" bats may use the place to separate from female bats who form nursery colonies with their pups.

Bats get a bad rap, Barlow said, including the "nonsense" about them flying into people's hair.

"The reason they fly erratically is they're trying to catch a flying insect," he said. "The bat's not going to hit you. He doesn't want anything to do with you."

Meanwhile, he said, bats already are in the foliage of palms and the Spanish moss hanging from trees around town, and most people don't even notice.

"They're all around you," said Barlow.

At one point, Nigh sat watching on the Riverwalk to see if bats were interacting with humans. They bats came out one by one.

"There wasn't anyone who was panic-stricken or horrified or scared," she said. "Most people who saw them thought they were really cool."

Nigh has become a bat person. "Absolutely," she said. "I love those guys."

And the bats may still decide to relocate.

"I've had bat houses take eight to 10 years to get used," Barlow said. "And I've literally gone to install a bat house that was sitting on the ground and bats were using it."

Or they could stay under the bridge.

"If they have a place that works, it's the right temperature, they're not suffering predation, nobody's up there harassing them, they will stay there," said Barlow. "That's what the [bats](#) are thinking—if I could get in their heads."

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