

# Tampa Bay Times

## Nighttime tours of nature preserves focus on bats



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Heads up for Halloween. The night sky is filled with those creatures of the dark, *bats*. Have no fear. We're not talking about Count Dracula and his Transylvanian colony. We're referring to those alluring mammals that fly. Before you shake out your vampire cape and don your fangs, check out the real thing, the ones with the webbed wings and feet designed for upside-down sleeping.

Because of my first bat sighting two weeks ago near the playground at Largo Central Park, I've gone from being a self-described bat-a-phobe to a big bat fan. That night, at Pavilion No. 4, nine bats put on a show dancing in and out of the shadows.

"Bats!" said my son.

"Eeep!" I said.

The spectacle, almost otherworldly, left me wondering: How often do people and bats cross paths in Largo?

Both the city and county have bat houses placed throughout the region. However, it is difficult to see bats sleeping in the boxes set on poles 20 feet high. "If you're going to look for them at bat houses, first identify if guano (feces) is on the ground," said Barbara Stalbird, nature park specialist for the city of Largo. "But you can see them in your own neighborhood. Bats are everywhere."

As for a good place to have a bat encounter in a city park, Stalbird mentioned the Largo Central Park Nature Preserve, a 31-acre park and stormwater treatment facility.

Because of my earlier good fortune, I assumed bat tracking would be a simple endeavor. However, I walked through the area on two consecutive afternoons. No luck.

With Stalbird's encouragement, I called Jeanne Murphy, a wildlife biologist and owner of Sensing Nature of Seminole.

"The best thing to do to see them is to simply look up in the sky for an animal that flies in a fluttery way," said Murphy, who will lead a night excursion through the preserve Thursday.

I wondered if a flashlight would scare them off.

"Bright light flashing inside bat houses is an irritant to bats," Murphy said. "If you do need a flashlight to help you move around the park at night, put red cellophane in front of the light."

Murphy thinks there are several species of bats in Largo Central Park Nature Preserve. I asked her what the most popular bat in Largo is.

"Brazilian free-tailed bats. They're typically 4 inches long and are called free-tailed because a part of their tail is free of the wing web," she said.

It was less than two hours before Game 1 of the World Series would start when I entered the preserve off East Bay Drive. The security personnel had been alerted a *St. Petersburg Times* employee was on a high-level, Halloween investigative mission.

I was instructed on after-hours procedure and sent on my way in the darkness.

With my cellophane-wrapped flashlight, I headed east, toward the closest bat house. Along the way, I saw four rabbits grazing near the water's edge. I watched a gopher tortoise mosey near its underground abode. At the first bat house, I studied the ground for the yucky stuff. No luck.

As I walked on the boardwalk, I felt I was being watched. I looked up at a tree limb swaying in the breeze and made out an osprey's silhouette. Through my camera lens, I could see its eyes were focused on my every move.

The mosquitoes started biting at 7:18 p.m. sharp. As I walked back to the main trail, I saw a flutter. Bats began darting close above me. I crouched down and for 20 minutes, I watched the swift, silent fluttering and looping of the bats. At points, I got dizzy with their movement in and out of the bushes.

The trek to find a bat colony was successful. If the mosquitoes hadn't gotten the best of me, I would have stayed longer. However, with 30 minutes to spare, I made it home to focus on Akinori Iwamura's first at-bat, the wooden kind of bat species which also has many fans in the bay area.

*Piper Castillo welcomes ideas for Largo Explorer. She's reachable at [pcastillo@sptimes.com](mailto:pcastillo@sptimes.com).*



What: Special evening programs • What: Largo Central Park Nature Preserve and George C. McGough Nature Center  
**Two night** hikes this week

The preserve is open to the public during daylight hours seven days a week. There are two night hike programs coordinated through the city of Largo for Halloween week including:

- Owl-O-Ween, with trick-or-treating along a nature trail and a campfire with s'more roasting, will take place from 6:30 to 8 p.m. Tuesday at George C. McGough Nature Center, 11901 146th St. N. The cost is \$5 per person; kids 2 and under are free.

- Owl and Bat Prowl, conducted by Jeanne Murphy, will take place at 6:45 p.m. Thursday at Largo Central Park Nature Preserve, 150 Highland Ave. SE. Murphy will hold a program on nocturnal animals and identifying nighttime sounds. The cost is \$3 per person; kids 2 and under are free.

Registration is requested for both events. Call 518-3047.

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