

LET'S GET BATTY: A CHAT ABOUT THE HISTORY OF THE UF BAT HOUSES

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Dr. Shelly Johnson

The iconic bat houses at the University of Florida (UF) captivate students and community members each night at dusk. Their occupancy on the UF campus has existed for over 30 years, thriving despite location changes and the development of multiple bat houses.

This engagement with bats at UF allowed Dr. Shelly Johnson, a state-specialized agent in natural resources with UF/IFAS Extension and a joint faculty member in the Department of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation, to further develop her expertise.

The bats' presence on the UF campus became more noticeable in 1987 when a fire destroyed Johnson Hall, home to 5,000 Brazilian free-tailed bats. With this fire, the bats were forced to find a new residence, which led them to the newly constructed Percy Beard Track and Field Stadium as well as Ben Hill Griffin Stadium.

However, the odor of guano (bat excrement) became a disturbance to attendees during sporting events and created an opportunity for UF faculty to search for a permanent solution.

While the idea had been previously laughed at, it became clear that the bats could not remain in the stadiums, even with the variety of benefits the mammals provide. The final solution was formed to build a bat house by Lake Alice on the edge of campus.

"As is true, anytime you put up a bat house, big or small, it can take a while for them to move in," Johnson said. Although the first house was built in 1991, the first tenants were not spotted until 1993. Two years had passed before the entire colony had claimed residence in 1995.

"As is true, anytime you put up a bat house, big or small, it can take a while for them to move in," Johnson said.

Johnson has a background in bat research, including bat monitoring, habitat use and tracking. This led to her involvement in many areas at UF, starting as a biological scientist in 2015.

Following the addition of the second bat house in 2010, Dr. Johnson had a front-row seat in the construction of the third bat house in 2017.

"I love bats. They are probably my favorite animal to work on." -Johnson





This house was added due to the overpopulation in the first two houses, but it remained vacant for multiple years as the bats were comfortable with their current home.

The need to remove the first bat house outweighed its sentimental value, as the structure had significantly deteriorated over the last 20 years. The 2022 hurricane season further exposed the house's preexistent fragility and vulnerability recognized by Dr. Johnson.

"Two sections of the house's bottom had fallen in; it was all tilted and the roof was open. There was one night I came, I saw there was a raccoon living in the house," Dr. Johnson said.

This provided the perfect opportunity to apply the exclusion tactic to force the bats to move out of the old house and making it possible to deconstruct the original house.

"I think it's really good for campus to have the bats here, and also really good for people to be able to come and experience the bats." -Johnson

Since this change in 2022, the population of maternal bats at UF has remained the largest colony residing in bat houses globally. The bats' nightly emergence from the houses consistently draws an audience.

Students, faculty, community members, and visitors can explore the colony located at Field and Fork Farm and Gardens on Museum Road. What was once a solution to an odor problem has now become an entertainment factor at the University of Florida.

To learn more about the history of the UF bats, visit <https://news.ufl.edu/2022/08/bat-house-renovation/>

