



DALE WEILER &  
LOTI WOODS VISIT BRACKEN CAVE IN  
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS.  
HOME TO  
APPROXIMATELY  
20 MILLION  
MEXICAN FREE-TAILED  
BATS!!

# FIVE YEARS AGO...

**D**ale Weiler and Loti Woods met at an art show in Tryon, North Carolina, which neither of them had particularly wanted to attend.

Weiler, a sculptor, had planned to be at a New York gallery, displaying one of his pieces. But when that piece broke in transport, he decided to attend the local opening instead.

Woods, a retired insurance broker, had been dragged to the show by her sister.

"It was love at first sight," Weiler says.

Eight days later, the couple was engaged.

"Was it impulsive? Yes," says Weiler. "But the longer you're around, the more you learn to trust your instincts."

Besides, Woods says, "We were in our 60s. We didn't have time to waste."

Before they met, both Weiler and Woods were at a crossroads.

"I was getting burnt out creating work just to sell at shows or supply galleries," Weiler says of his art.

Raised along mountain streams, fly fishing with his father, Weiler's stone sculptures have always been inspired by the wild, depicting images from alabaster shore birds to bronze-carved turtle, trout or fowl.

Following her 40-year office career, Woods was ready for a new adventure — one that she hoped would lead her back outdoors.

"I've always loved animals and being outside," she says. "I bought my last house because I saw a deer in the driveway."

"When life presents an opportunity," says Weiler, "you either see it or you don't."

THE LARGEST BAT COLONY IN THE WORLD!!

MORE...  
→



Two months after they met, they married and moved into a home that Woods describes as “three acres of English ivy and privet.” The couple went to work hand-pulling and replacing the invasive species with native plants such as ironweed, green-and-golds and cardinal flowers. Weiler built stone fountains to attract more birds and butterflies.

As more wildlife moved onto their property, their interest in the natural world blossomed — particularly, their interest in what Woods calls “underdog species.”

“There are a lot of large groups out there already dealing with the charismatic wildlife,” Weiler says. “We were most curious about the animals in the shadows, not getting their due.”

For example, insects, bats and opossums — animals, the couple learned, that have essential roles and fascinating histories — are often overlooked due to stigma or for being perceived as commonplace.

Though Woods and Weiler both had a deep appreciation for nature, neither had ever worked in conservation. But the more they learned, the more they wanted to share their knowledge with others, ultimately leading them to launch Weiler Woods for Wildlife, a website to help educate and advocate for under-appreciated wildlife.

The site features animal blog posts by Woods and art sculptures by Weiler, sales which he now donates entirely to wildlife conservation causes. The site also includes resources on getting involved and a list of environmental organizations well-vetted by the couple.

But its real crown jewel is the couple’s field guide to misunderstood wildlife, highlighting animals from around the world, from hyenas to jellyfish to skunks.

“We want to inspire people to be curious,” Woods says, “to start thinking beyond themselves and beyond their house; to walk outside and see that orange-and-black bug and think, ‘Wow. What is it?’”

Beauty, after all, is found in unexpected places.

“Don’t overlook it,” says Weiler.

Here, the couple shares a look at four local animals featured in their online field guide for misunderstood wildlife.



SPECIES:

OPOSSUMS

TOTAL NUMBER OF SPECIES:

60

The only species found in North America is the Virginia opossum (*Didelphis virginiana*). This species is the U.S.’s and Canada’s only native marsupial, meaning it carries its young (up to 13 at a time!) in a pouch on its stomach.

THE MISCONCEPTION:

OPOSSUMS EAT TRASH AND ARE GARDEN NUISANCES

THE REALITY:

Opossums can be helpful to gardens. Unlike skunks, opossums do not dig — but they do indulge in garden pests such as slugs and snails, not to mention they’re more than happy to clean up rotting fruit left on the ground.

WHY THEY’RE SO COOL:

› Opossums eat an estimated 5,000 ticks per season. They also eat cockroaches and snakes — which they’re well-equipped to do, considering opossums have some immunity to snake venom.

› While an opossum’s best-known defense against predators is its ability to “play dead,” this trick is actually an involuntary reflex caused by extreme fear. During this time, the opossum not only goes comatose, it also reduces its heart rate and respiration. Its anal

glands express a green mucus which smells of decay. The opossum can remain in this state for up to four hours.

› The opossum is the oldest surviving land mammal. The first opossum-like species, the *Mimoperadectes houdei*, evolved 65 million years ago alongside dinosaurs. Even more impressive, while ancient fossils show slight differences in the opossum’s prehistoric predecessor, the species has remained relatively unchanged over time.

3 SPECIES IN THE U.S.



SPECIES:

VULTURES

TOTAL NUMBER OF SPECIES:

23

More than half of this number are considered threatened or endangered largely due to poisonings. Vultures feed on carcasses, so if those carcasses are contaminated with pesticides or other toxins, the bird is affected. In the U.S., there are three species: the black vulture, the turkey vulture and the critically endangered California condor.

THE MISCONCEPTION:

VULTURES ARE GROTESQUE & UNSANITARY

THE REALITY:

Vultures help prevent the spread of disease. Case in point: In India, it is customary to leave deceased cows in open fields — making them a primary food source for vultures. In the 1990s, 98% of the local vulture population died after eating drug-contaminated cattle. As a result, disease among nearby residents skyrocketed. The uneaten cow carcasses contaminated drinking water, and the populations of less-effective scavengers, such as rats and feral dogs, exploded.



THEY STOP DISEASES!!

WHY THEY’RE SO COOL:

› There are two classifications of vulture: Old World and New World. Though species belonging to each look and behave similarly, they are not genetically related — which means they evolved independently in order to fulfill one of nature’s most critical roles: the prevention of diseases caused by animal decay.

› North American vultures (New Worlds) are closely related to storks and herons. European vultures (Old Worlds), however,

are more closely related to birds of prey like hawks or eagles.

› Vultures are surprisingly hygienic. Their featherless heads are easy to keep clean. They sunbathe after meals to kill harmful bacteria. And, after stepping in a carcass, they poop on their own legs, which may sound unsanitary, but in fact, uric acid in their excrement kills bacteria. It’s gross, but cool — literally. This mechanism also helps keep the bird cool on hot days.





**SPECIES:**  
**BATS**

**TOTAL NUMBER OF SPECIES:**  
**1,400+**

Bats range in size from a 6-inch to a 6-foot wingspan. There are 19 species native to the Eastern U.S., with the big brown bat (*Eptesicus fuscus*) being one of the most common in East Tennessee.

**THE MISCONCEPTION:**  
**BATS DRINK BLOOD & CARRY RABIES**

**THE REALITY:**

There are only three "vampire" bat species, all of which live in Latin America and prefer the blood of cattle over humans. And most bats do not carry rabies. According to a study cited by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, among a sample of weak or sick bats collected for screening, only 6% tested positive for rabies.

**WHY THEY'RE SO COOL:**

› Bats can eat up to 1,000 insects — mosquitoes, beetles, grasshoppers and more — per hour. According to the National Park Service, bats that feast on insects add up to more than \$3.7 billion worth of pest control each year. Meanwhile, bat species native to tropical climates, preferring fruit, are important pollinators, critical to mango, banana and guava crops.

› Bats are the world's only flying mammal, and they are among the fastest fliers on the planet. In 2016, a Mexican free-tailed bat was clocked traveling 100 miles per hour. Peregrine falcons, which are considered the fastest member of the animal kingdom, can dive-bomb at speeds of 220 miles per hour. Flying horizontally, however, they reach around 60 miles per hour.

› Bats are extremely social animals. In fact, some species, like the greater spear-nosed bat of South and Central America, are known to share food and "babysit" pups while other group members forage.



**SPECIES:**  
**RED WOLVES**

**TOTAL NUMBER OF SPECIES:**  
**ONE.**

The only red wolves left in the wild live in North Carolina's Alligator River Wildlife Refuge, where numbers are estimated between 10-20, making the animal the eighth-most endangered species in the world.

**THE MISCONCEPTION:**  
**RED WOLVES ARE DANGEROUS PREDATORS**

**THE REALITY:**

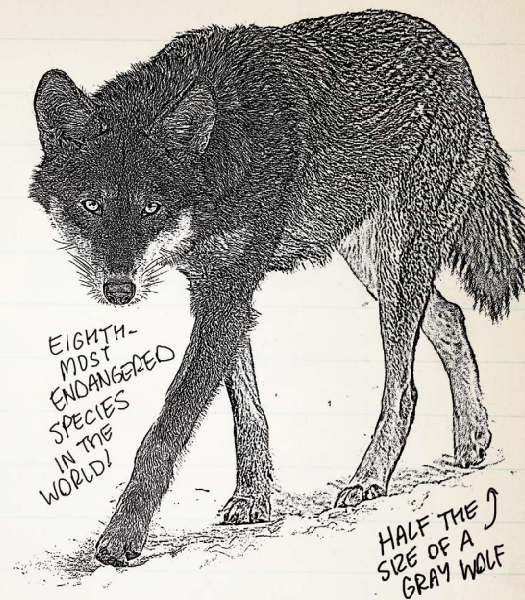
Since the animal's reintroduction to the wild in 1987, there have been no recorded red wolf attacks on humans and only seven recorded attacks on livestock, mostly goats and chickens, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. About half the size of a gray wolf, the red wolf's primary food sources include small rodents, raccoon and white-tailed deer.

**WHY THEY'RE SO COOL:**

› Red wolves have close-knit families. They mate for life and give birth to one litter of pups per year. The following year, those pups (now yearlings) hang around to help their parents care for the next litter.

› Wolves have slightly webbed feet, allowing them to swim distances of up to 8 miles. They run on their tiptoes, which increases their agility and speed. A wolf can run up to 40 miles per hour, but only for a few minutes.

› Efforts to re-establish red wolf populations through breeding programs are underway at 40-plus zoos and wildlife centers throughout the U.S., including Chattanooga's Reflection Riding Arboretum and Nature Center. There, four enclosures house six red wolves — ambassadors of their species, working to break the "big bad wolf" stereotype one visitor at a time.



**'JUST SETTLING IN'**



Dale Weiler and Loti Woods (far right) pose with Reflection Riding Arboretum and Nature Center staff after donating one of Weiler's limited edition red wolf castings to help the center raise awareness for the species.

See more of the field guide at [weilerwoodsforwildlife.com](http://weilerwoodsforwildlife.com).

Dale Weiler's stone sculpture depicting a red wolf mom and her pup is helping to spread awareness of the animal across the U.S. In 2019, Weiler created 20 limited edition hand-painted castings of his piece, five of which were sponsored by Defenders of Wildlife, though all were donated to different red wolf conservation centers, including Reflection Riding Arboretum and Nature Center. With a market value of \$5,000, Weiler and Woods say they chose centers that could best use the sculptures for educational and fundraising efforts.