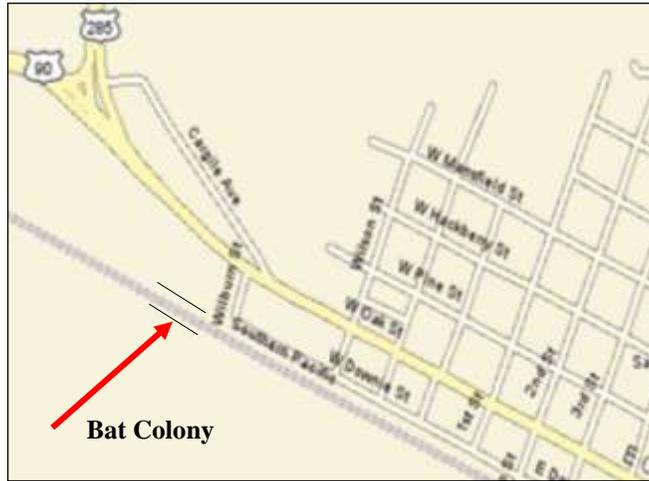




[http://www.desertmuseum.org/kids/bats/mexican\\_free\\_tailed\\_bat.php](http://www.desertmuseum.org/kids/bats/mexican_free_tailed_bat.php)



# Mexican Free-tailed Bats in Terrell County



Sanderson Chamber of Commerce  
PO Box 734  
Sanderson TX 79848  
432-345-2324



Mexican free-tailed bat in flight; photo by Ron Groves / EOL Learning and Education Group on Flickr (public domain image)

## Mexican Free-tailed Bat Colony

In caves, under bridges, in attics, church steeples and almost any dark nook or cranny all over the Southwest, bat species have established summer colonies. The most prolific species in our area, indeed, the whole of North America, are the Mexican (or Brazilian) Free-Tailed bats, *Tadarida brasiliensis*. In fact, they are one of the most abundant mammal species found in this hemisphere.

Our bats have established a major colony under the railroad bridge at the corner of Wilcox and Downie, on the west side of Sanderson. Vehicles can park off-road and watch from this vantage point as the bats depart in the evenings at sunset for nightly feedings or return in the mornings at day-break.

Very often, birds of prey such as the red-tailed hawk swoop in to snatch unsuspecting bats on the wing for their evening repast. But, they are a minor concern to the thousands of bats as they pour out from under the bridge in ever-darkening clouds and take to the skies.

Bats arrive at the colony with warm weather in late February and leave at the first cold front in October, depending on the weather conditions. The viewing area is free and open to the public, but the colony itself is on private property. Respect the owners' property rights and do not trespass.

## Mexican Free-tailed Bat

Mexican free-tailed bats average about 3 1/2" in length and weigh in at nearly 1/2 ounce. Unlike many species, these bats possess a naked tail (not covered by membrane) that is nearly one-half their length, giving them their name. They possess a wrinkled muzzle and have wide-set ears to aid in their echolocation of prey, through the use of high-pitched "squeaks." Their wings are long and narrow, which aids in their fantastic aerial acrobatics. Free-tails have been clocked at speeds of 60 to 80 miles per hour, using free-fall and tailwinds. Free-tailed bats range in color from gray to dark brown.

The Free-tails are found in most of North America, down into Mexico, Central America and parts of South America, but are almost totally absent from the Amazon jungle. They are also found in the islands of the Caribbean. Bracken Cave at San Antonio hosts the largest colony with some 20 million bats. When the young are being born, the population can swell to twice that number. Bats can be found cruising generally at an altitude between 600 feet and 3300 feet, but some have been seen in regions as high as 9800 feet. Although some bachelor colonies have been found at high mountain altitudes, nesting and nursery colonies tend to be found at lower altitudes and warmer temperatures.

Free-tails are migratory in the western US, wintering in Mexico and Baja California. Not every bat leaves, and some live year-round in the area. Eastern species generally do not migrate, opting to shift their colonies to more protected areas during the winter.

Bats are voracious insectivores, catching their prey in mid-air. It is a misconception that bats only hunt at night. They are also active in the morning and early afternoon during the summer months. The colony in Austin, Texas, largest urban colony with an estimated 1.5 million bats, consume as much as 30,000 pounds of insects per night. In addition, bats are efficient pollinators of farmers' crops. Bats are very popular with tourists and have been designated the official flying mammal of the state of Texas.

Other predators of bats in our area include birds of prey, snakes, skunks, house cats and raccoons, as well as dermestid beetles, which eat bat droppings and any unlucky pup that falls to the floor of the roost. The strong ammonia odor associated with bats is due to the dermestid beetles, which thrive on bat droppings. The chemical odor is given off by the beetles as they break down the waste. Roosts free of dermestids do not have a strong odor.

Free-tailed bats are not monogamous and may have multiple partners. The breeding females roost together and their single newborns and young may be clustered in nurseries while the mother is away feeding. She locates her young by scent and by voice when returning to the roost. As in all true mammals, they nurse their young multiple times daily. By the age of 4 to 7 weeks, the youngster is weaned and able to fend for itself. It is unknown how long bats live, although certain subjects have been observed for over 18 years.

Although bat populations are abundant, their roosting habits make them sensitive to habitat destruction. In many areas they are protected, and our Free-tails are protected by their designation as the state flying mammal. The incidence of rabies in Free-tailed species is lower than most, but the popular notion is that all bats are rabid. Far more beneficial than dangerous, bats do not have an affinity for human hair and should be allowed to go unmolested as they perform their civic duty of eliminating mosquitoes and other insect pests.

Photos courtesy of Wikipedia, public domain and as attributed.