Cactus traps California Myotis in British Columbia

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Swamp's Edge, Whaletown, BC. V0P 1Z0

Even at the northern end of the Strait of Georgia, British Columbia, summers can be hot and dry. It is a season when taking your cactus off the windowsill and putting it outside on the porch seems like a good idea. The cactus in this story was placed close to a south-facing wall of the main building of the Loon Ranch on Cortes Island. The cactus plant was about 23 cm in height (Figure 1).

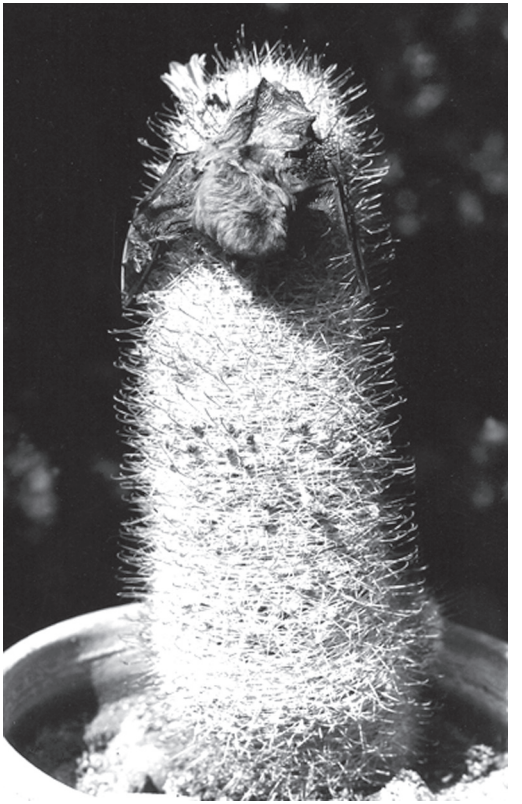

Figure 1. California Myotis trapped on a potted cactus plant on Cortes Island, BC. 28 August 1998 (Christian W. Gronau). BC Photo 3264.

During the night of 28 August 1998, a small bat, the California Myotis (*Myotis californicus*), unfortunately tried to navigate the narrow gap (ca. 15 cm) between the cactus and the wall and misjudged its own wingspan – or so it seems, given the fact that the animal was trapped between the cactus and wall. All it took was one hooked spine to snag a wingtip, and the bat's momentum would have swung it around and slammed it into the cactus. The position of the bat when found (Figure 1) suggests that the animal struggled, unsuccessfully, to free itself. The bat was dead when discovered the next morning.

The little corpse, after having been transformed into an articulated skeleton by insects (Figure 2), became part of an exhibit on bats, curated by the author for the Cortes Island Museum and Archives Society, that was on display for the 2004, 2005, and 2006 seasons.

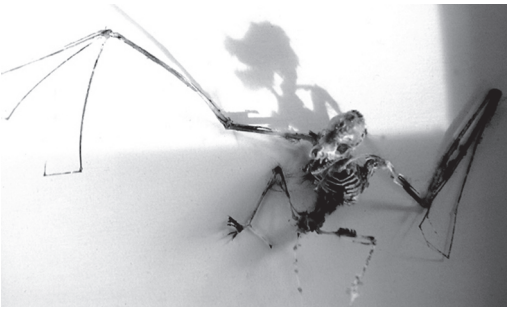

Figure 2. Complete skeleton of the California Myotis removed from a potted cactus plant on Cortes Island, BC (Christian W. Gronau). BC Photo 3264.

Clearly there is an uneasy relationship between spiny plants and animals. Patrick Ludden, Executive Assistant with Bat Conservation International, in a personal communication 10 July 2000, wrote: Merlin [Tuttle] said, "*quite often bats become hooked on cactus or other spiny plants in the wild... We have had to remove some plants near the entrance to Bracken Cave* [Texas], *because dozens of bats* [Mexican Free-tailed Bats, *Tadarida brasiliensis*] *were getting caught on spines and dying*." Incidentally, the entrance to Bracken Cave is situated at the end of the runway of Randolph Air Force Base in Texas. Cacti may have been the least of the problems the colony of several hundred thousand Mexican Free-tailed Bats had to cope with. The United States Air Force had to schedule their routine training flights to avoid the dusk and dawn activities of the bat swarms as collisions between aircraft and bats were a constant danger damaging jet engines and occasionally crashing planes and always killing the bats (see Fenton 1992).

Entrapment of birds and bats in the hooks and velcro-like scales of alien plants, especially burdock, is well documented in North America (*e.g.,* McNicholl 1988, 1994, Fenton 1992, Wilkinson 1999, Van Damme 2005, and Catling 2005). Far less known are the hazards that naturally occurring cacti pose to birds and bats in the field.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Brigitte Grosse, proprietor of the Loon Ranch, for having brought the cactus incident to my attention.

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About the Author

Christian Gronau studied paleontology in Germany and worked as a geologist in the Great Bear Lake area in the (then) Northwest Territories where he also met his wife Aileen. They are naturalists who have lived for nearly 30 years off-the-grid on Cortes Island where they operate a small, strictly beach-based shellfish farm.