

Bat Conservation Trust

# Living with bats

A guide for roost owners



Brown long-eared bat, J Kaczanow

Answers to the most frequently asked questions about sharing your home with bats, advice on looking after your lodgers, a guide to identifying the species most likely to be living in your house, guidelines on caring for injured bats and useful contacts for further information.

# Frequently asked questions

## **I think that there are bats in my loft or roof, but am not sure – how can I tell?**

Often with difficulty! Some householders have had bats for years without being aware of them. Different species of bat prefer different places to roost (or shelter).

Pipistrelles, the most common house bats, often choose modern houses and like tight spaces, usually roosting outside the roof space, behind barge boards or hanging tiles or between underfelt and tiles. You may find droppings on windows, walls or sills in summer, or you may see no sign at all. At dusk they come out to feed, so keep an eye out for their amazing aerial acrobatics at that time!

Long-eared bats prefer older buildings, and roost inside the roof void against the timbers, usually along the ridge or at hip joints. Their droppings are more easily seen, often in a line under the ridge, but these bats come out after dark and so are harder to spot.

Another clue is the chattering sound that bats, especially pipistrelles, make at dusk just before they fly out to feed. In July and August they are particularly vocal around dawn, when hungry babies excitedly call to mothers as they return from their night's hunting.

## **How can I recognise their droppings?**

Do the crumble test! Roll a dropping in a bit of tissue between your finger and thumb - if it feels hard you probably have mice, not bats. A bat dropping will crumble to dust easily because it consists of indigestible insect parts. Bat droppings present no significant health hazard in the UK, and can be swept up to use as an excellent fertiliser for the garden.

## **Will the bats cause any damage?**

Bats are not rodents, and do not nibble or gnaw wood, wires or insulation. They do not build nests, nor do they bring bedding material or insect prey into their roost. Bats are clean and sociable animals and spend many hours grooming themselves. Make sure that your water tanks are covered, as this will stop bats, birds and flies from getting in.

## **Why do bats use buildings? I thought they lived in caves.**

Bats also roost in tree holes and caves, though the extent varies with different species. Buildings offer a warmer environment for some species of bat, and are mainly used for breeding during the summer months. Tree roosts are quite often destroyed by people 'over-tidying' dead wood, while bats use caves mainly for winter hibernation (although some species may also breed in them).

## **Will we get overwhelmed with bats?**

No. A bat mother normally has only a single baby in a year, and not always every year. Bats are most often found in houses in summer, as the females need somewhere warm to have their babies. Here, like all mammals, they give birth to live young, which they suckle on milk for several weeks until the babies can fly and feed themselves, when they will all move away. However, if bats find a place for a maternity roost that really suits them, they will often return year after year.

## **Looking after your lodgers**

All British bats eat insects, which they catch using a sophisticated system called echolocation, listening to the returning echoes of their high-pitched calls to build up a 'sound picture'. They feed on a diet of midges, mosquitoes, moths and beetles, though different species have their own tastes. By growing plants that are attractive to a range of insects, we can make our gardens important feeding stations for bats, birds and other wildlife. Call the Bat Helpline (0845 1300 228) today for a copy of the 'Encouraging bats' booklet, which contains lots of tips on wildlife-friendly gardening, bat boxes, and how to identify the species that you might see in your garden.

A problem often faced by bats in gardens is cats. If you own a cat, you can help to save lives this summer by bringing your cat in for the night half an hour before sunset so that the bats can emerge from their roost undisturbed. This is especially important from mid-June to the end of August, which is when bats are rearing their young. This also allows the bats to return at dawn undisturbed by cats. If you find a bat that appears to have been injured by a cat, call the Bat Helpline (0845 1300 228) for details of your nearest bat carer.

## **What happens to bats in winter?**

Because insect prey becomes scarce in winter, bats go into hibernation. They find a cool place, free from disturbance, and tuck themselves away, often in a crack or crevice, but sometimes in sheds or garages. If you find a hibernating bat take care not to disturb it, as unnecessary waking burns up valuable fat stores. Don't be surprised if you see a bat flying during the winter as they do wake occasionally, to move to a new site or to look for food or water.

## **What do I do if I don't want the bats?**

Bats and their roosts are protected by law, which means that it is illegal to disturb, kill or injure them or to damage, destroy or obstruct access to a bat roost, whether intentionally or recklessly. As bats tend to return to the same roosts every year, the roosts are protected whether bats are present or not. But that doesn't mean you are forced to keep them, just that you must ask advice from your Statutory Nature Conservation Organisation (SNCO) to keep within the law.

If bats are causing problems or are unwelcome there is a range of options that can be taken, but you must first discuss this with your local SNCO – see the back page of this booklet for a list of contacts. Sometimes bats get into the living area of the house – we provide advice on how to deal with this elsewhere in this booklet. If this happens regularly, your SNCO will be able to help.

## **Will I be able to have work done on my loft or roof?**

Having bats does not mean that building work, roof repairs or timber treatment cannot take place, but you will need to make sure that you consult your local SNCO before work starts and follow their advice on how to proceed. They will send a trained bat worker to inspect your roost and provide advice, free of charge. They may even be able to identify the number and species of bats in your roost.

# Who's living in my house?

There are seventeen species of bat in the UK, but only a few are likely to roost in houses. Here we list the species that you are most likely to find, although there are always exceptions to the rule...



The most abundant British bat species, the **pipistrelle** was recently identified as two separate species – the soprano pipistrelle and the common pipistrelle (left). As they are almost identical to the untrained eye, the easiest way to distinguish between the two is by their echolocation frequency – 55kHz for soprano, 45kHz for common. A third species, the Nathusius' pipistrelle, is quite rare and found less often in houses.

Pipistrelles prefer to roost in very confined spaces around the outside of buildings, typically behind hanging tiles, soffits and barge boards, under roofing felt or in cavity walls. They do not usually enter roof spaces, although well-established large colonies in older buildings may do so.

These tiny bats generally measure between 3.3cm and 4.8cm (head and body length), with a wingspan of 18cm to 25cm. Their preferred diet consists of midges and mosquitoes – a single common pipistrelle may eat up to 3,000 insects in one night, one-third of its body weight!

The **brown long-eared bat** (right) is one of the most endearing bats. Its long ears make it instantly recognisable, even in flight. At rest however the ears may not always be obvious: the bat may curl its ears back or tuck them away completely under its wings.



Brown long-eared bats roost singly or in small groups among the roof timbers of the apex, particularly around ridge ends and chimneys, and in crevices in ridge tiles. These medium-sized bats spend more time inside the roof space than many other bats, and are generally very quiet inside the roost, not leaving until after dark.

The brown long-eared bat, along with its rarer cousin the grey long-eared bat, flies slowly amongst foliage to pick insects off leaves and bark. They are known as 'whispering bats' because their echolocation sounds are very quiet, and the size of their ears means that their hearing is particularly sensitive.

Other species of bat may be found roosting in houses, depending on the style and location of the house. Here are three more species that may roost in houses:

The **serotine bat**, one of the largest bat species in the UK, is almost exclusively found roosting in houses across southern England and Wales. Rarer than pipistrelles and brown long-eareds, serotines usually roost in crevices around chimneys and in cavity walls. Their favoured prey is large beetles, which they find on farmland and grassland.

The **Daubenton's bat** occasionally roosts in houses in Scotland (usually in buildings close to waterways, such as old mills) but rarely in the rest of the UK. This bat is usually seen skimming over the water just after dark in search of insects above the surface.

**Horseshoe bats**, probably the most unusual-looking of the UK's bats, are sometimes found roosting in houses in south-western England and Wales. Greater and lesser horseshoe bats hang free in the roost from their feet.

## Where will they be roosting?

Any structure is a potential bat roost, providing there is sufficient access - bats need only a 20mm gap! Here's a guide to where they might be coming in and out of your house.



### Key to diagram

- |                |                  |                       |
|----------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| 1: end tiles   | 5: porch         | 10: eaves             |
| 2: barge board | 6: lead flashing | 11: sash window frame |
| 3: soffit      | 7: hanging tiles | 12: wood cladding     |
| 4: gable end   | 8: ridge tiles   | 13: fascia board      |
|                | 9: broken tiles  | 14: window sill       |

# What if I find a bat on the ground, or flying in my house?

Bats are shy and unobtrusive animals, so if you come across one on the ground during daylight hours or flying inside a building, it is likely to need some help. Roost owners may occasionally find bats, particularly babies, on the ground in their garden.

Bats should normally be handled only by licensed bat workers, but unlicensed people are allowed to handle them for the purpose of rehabilitation and release. If you find a grounded bat you may need to contact your local bat carer to help you.

## Grounded bats

A bat found on the ground during daylight hours is likely to be in trouble already. Sometimes, a grounded bat may just be exhausted and need a bit of time to recover with a little help. It may be injured or in danger from passing predators (such as cats), so it is better to take it into captivity temporarily and get advice from the Bat Helpline (0845 1300 228) or your local bat group.

Bats are gentle creatures and seldom show any aggression, but they are wild animals and may be frightened or in pain. You must wear protective gloves and handle the bat as little as possible.

Place a small cardboard box over the bat and use a piece of cardboard to gently and carefully slide the bat into the box. Put a loosely crumpled piece of cloth, such as an old tea towel, in one corner – the bat will feel safer if it has something to crawl into and hide. Put a few small air holes into the lid and a very shallow container of water (such as a jam jar lid) in one corner so that the bat may drink if it needs to. You can even put some wet cotton wool in the lid for the bat to drink from.

Once it is dark outside you may be able to let the bat go by placing the box on its side on a wall or shed, at least five feet off the ground – don't forget to take the lid off! The bat can then crawl out of the box and fly away when it is ready. If the bat does not fly away within fifteen minutes, take it back inside and get expert help from your local bat carer or, if you do not know of one in your area, from the Bat Helpline.

All British bats are small, and you may be surprised at how tiny they are. Baby bats are sometimes found on the ground in June, July or early August. At all other times of the year, they will be fully-grown and independent. Baby bats have little or no fur. A good test is to blow the fur very gently – if it parts then the bat is unlikely to be very young. If you are sure it is a baby, you must get expert help as quickly as possible in order to try to locate the roost and return the baby to its mother.

## Bats flying indoors

A bat flying in a room has most likely taken a wrong turn and is looking for a way out! Close the door, open the windows as widely as possible, draw back the curtains and remove anything that obstructs the window opening. Dim the lights and give the bat the chance to find its own way out. Bats navigate by sending out high-pitched sounds and listening for the echoes, so the bat should soon detect any opening that leads out of the room.

NEVER try to catch a flying bat – you are likely to injure it severely and it may even bite in self-defence. Sometimes young bats which are inexperienced flyers will become exhausted before finding the way out. They may try to land on a wall or curtains, or they may crash land on furniture or the floor. In this case, you should contain the bat as described earlier, and then release it in the evening.

## Bats and rabies

You may have heard that some bats in Europe carry a rabies virus called European Bat Lyssavirus (EBLV). This is very rare in the UK – out of nearly five thousand dead bats tested between 1986 and 2004, only four were found with the live virus. This research is ongoing.

Rabies is passed on via a bite or scratch from an infected animal, or from its saliva coming in contact with your mucous membranes (for example your eyes, mouth or nose). It has never been found in bat droppings or urine in the UK.

You do not need to worry about bats and rabies if you don't handle bats. If you need to handle a grounded or injured bat, see the opposite page for advice on how to pick it up and contain it. Wearing gloves is safest for both you and the bat, but if you are bitten or scratched by a bat or if a bite is suspected, you should do the following as a precaution:

- Wash the wound immediately with soap and water for at least five minutes. Cleansing the wound with an alcohol base or other disinfectant.
- Seek advice from your doctor about post-exposure rabies treatment promptly.
- If possible, keep the bat in a suitable box and get expert help for it – call the Bat Helpline (0845 1300 228) for details of your nearest bat worker.

# The future for bats

The Bat Conservation Trust (BCT) wants a future where everyone, everywhere can enjoy seeing and hearing bats as a natural part of their environment.

We depend on the public not only for money to help conserve bats and their habitats, but also to provide the data that informs that conservation. If you would like to help us with this important work, you can do so by counting your bats as they emerge from their roost on two separate evenings during the summer. For more information and a survey form, please call the Bat Helpline (0845 1300 228) and ask for the National Bat Monitoring Programme.

Alternatively, if you would like to see even more bats, you can join BCT or your local bat group. There are nearly 100 bat groups around the UK: just ask us for details of your nearest group!

## Useful contacts

### The Bat Conservation Trust (BCT)

15 Cloisters House, 8 Battersea Park Road, London SW8 4BG

Call the Bat Helpline today on **0845 1300 228** or visit **[www.bats.org.uk](http://www.bats.org.uk)**

Email **[enquiries@bats.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@bats.org.uk)**

Contact us for more information on living with and looking after bats, taking part in the colony count scheme, and for details of your local bat group or bat carers.

### Statutory Nature Conservation Organisations (SNCOs)

English Nature

Telephone 01733 455000

Web [www.english-nature.org.uk](http://www.english-nature.org.uk)

Countryside Council for Wales

Telephone 01248 385500

Web [www.ccw.gov.uk](http://www.ccw.gov.uk)

Scottish Natural Heritage

Telephone 0131 447 4784

Web [www.snh.gov.uk](http://www.snh.gov.uk)

Environment & Heritage Service (Northern Ireland)

Telephone 02890 546558

Web [www.ehsni.gov.uk](http://www.ehsni.gov.uk)

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