

BAT FAQs

There are 17 species of bat in the UK and the most common species are the pipistrelles which are also our smallest species and would fit easily into a matchbox. Despite their size they do a sterling job of eating flying insects - it's estimated that a single adult pipistrelle will put away about 3,000 in one night. Our rarest species is the greater mouse-eared bat which is also our largest bat, with a body length of about 90mm - still small enough to be fit comfortably in one hand.

Bats in Avon

Avon is a great place for bats. Our landscapes of ancient woodlands, pastures, wetlands, hedgerows and mine and cave systems provide a wealth of habitats for bats. Nearly every UK species has been recorded in Avon including the greater horseshoe and Bechstein's bat, which are amongst the rarest.

Biology

All UK bats species are insectivorous and mainly nocturnal. They hunt insects at night using a sophisticated echolocation system in which pulses of high frequency sound are used like a radar to create a picture of the world around them, even in complete darkness. Contrary to popular belief however, bats are not blind.

Because of their reliance on insects British bat species hibernate over the winter when food would otherwise be too scarce for them to survive. During hibernation they lower their body temperature and heart rate to conserve energy, and survive on reserves of body fat built up during the autumn. Bats are particularly vulnerable during this time, as repeated disturbance causes them to wake, burning crucial energy reserves with no way of replacing them. Bats also practice a shorter term version of hibernation during the day which is referred to as torpor.

Adult female bats usually give birth to one or two young annually in June and these are suckled for about 5-6 weeks before they start flying and catching their own food. The females of a particular population will gather together in favoured maternity roosts, sometimes in large numbers - roosts of well over a thousand pipistrelles have been recorded. Mating takes place in the autumn and sometimes over the winter months when bats rouse from hibernation. Females store the live sperm and the egg is then fertilised the following year in time for a summer birth.

Bat Roosts

Bats do not nest, they roost in natural or man-made structures which are commonly found in houses, trees, bridges, caves and mines. They have different roost requirements at different times of year. To hibernate they need somewhere with a stable, cool temperature whilst a maternity roost should be very warm. Bats may roost singly, in small groups or in large numbers depending upon a number of factors including species, sex and time of year. Favoured roosts maybe used year after year although bats will usually move around a lot during the course of a year.

Bats in Houses

For some bat species our houses have become an important alternative to more natural roost sites such as trees or caves. To a bat they offer an array of nooks and crannies which might just have the perfect conditions - maybe in the loft, under a roof tile or in cavity walls. Many people envisage a tumble-down, ruined castle to be the ideal place to find bats. In reality they are much more likely to prefer a nice, modern house with central heating.

In the vast majority of cases bats and human occupants can live together without any problems. Very often house holders might not even be aware of their furry, nocturnal lodgers. When problems do occur there are usually simple measures that can be put in place to the benefit of both bats and humans. If you think you might have bats in your house and are concerned help is at hand. Contact the National Bat Helpline on 0845 1300 228 or visit the Bat Conservation Trust on www.bats.org.uk.

Bats and the Law

All UK bats and their roosts are protected by law. It is illegal to kill, injure or take a wild bat, or intentionally or recklessly damage, destroy or obstruct access to a bat roost. For private householders this means that you will need to consult Natural England (NE) before carrying out any repairs to your house which might disturb a bat roost. NE will then advise on how work should be carried out legally and with the minimum disruption to bats. This advice is usually given free of charge.

Where there is a risk of disturbance to bats or bat roosts through a commercial development the services of a professional ecological consultant maybe required and a special license might be needed to allow development to go ahead.

Bats and Human Health

The European Bat Lyssavirus is a virus similar to but not the same as classical rabies. It has been recorded in British bats but is extremely rare. To catch the disease from those few bats thought to carry the live virus there needs to be close physical contact with a bat that leads to a bite or a scratch or its saliva coming into contact with mucous membranes. Bats generally avoid human contact and even for people who share their homes with bats direct contact is rare.

The simplest way to avoid any risk is not to handle bats. In the unlikely event you do come across a stranded bat call the National Bat Hotline for advice. In the extremely unlikely event you are bitten by a bat consult your GP immediately. There are effective medical treatments for rabies if it is caught in its early stages. For more information visit the Bat Conservation Trust website www.bats.org.uk.

Threats to Bats

Increased legal protection and a greater understanding and appreciation of these fascinating mammals means that direct persecution of bats is now much less common than in the past.

Perhaps a much more insidious threat come from the loss of roost sites and insect rich foraging areas in the wider landscape. The Avon Wildlife Trust regularly works with landowners and managers on habitat enhancement projects for bats.

To find out more about bats contact the Avon Bat Group on at www.avonbatgroup.org.uk or the Bat Conservation Trust at www.bats.org.uk.