

Bats: European protected species

There are 17 species of bats in Britain, all with their own preferences for roosting and hunting. All eat insects, which they either catch in flight or pick off foliage or the ground. Bats are found throughout Britain, although some species are only found in certain areas. They roost in buildings, trees and underground sites, such as abandoned mines, cellars, tunnels.

Habitat

Old farm buildings are commonly used by bats for roosting, as they provide the undisturbed conditions bats prefer and are often close to good hunting habitats such as woodland or wetlands. Typical roost sites include roof voids, eaves, cracks and crevices in structural timbers, hollows in stone walls, cavities in wooden door lintels or under exterior cladding. As bats are small and often only present seasonally, their roosts can be hard to find.

Although bats can use buildings of all types, some buildings provide more of the features that bats prefer and so are more likely to be used. Below are some factors that influence the likelihood of a building being used by bats.

Factors affecting the probability of a building being used by bats in summer

Increase probability:

- Disused or little used; largely undisturbed.
- Large roof void with unobstructed flying spaces.
- Large dimension roof timbers with cracks, joints and holes.
- Uneven roof covering with gaps, though not too draughty.
- Entrances that bats can fly in through.
- Hanging tiles or wood cladding, especially on south-facing walls.
- Rural setting.
- Close to woodland and/or water.
- Pre-20th century or early 20th century construction.
- Roof warmed by the sun.

- Within the distribution area of horseshoe and serotine bats.

Decrease probability:

- Urban setting or highly urbanised area with few feeding places.
- Small or cluttered roof void (especially for long-eared bats).
- Heavily disturbed.
- Modern construction with few gaps around soffits or eaves (but be aware these may be used by pipistrelles in particular).
- Prefabricated with steel and sheet materials.
- Active industrial premises.
- Roof shaded from the sun.

Lifecycle

In summer (May to September), female bats form maternity colonies, where they give birth and rear their baby. These colonies, which may include some males, tend to use the same sites every summer and generally disperse in late summer or autumn, though there are differences between species.

As the weather turns colder in October, bats start to hibernate in sheltered places, though they may wake up when the weather is mild enough to hunt. Between breeding and hibernation, bats may use a variety of types of roost, though it is unusual to find large numbers in one place.

Some species of bats originally roosted in caves and now take advantage of abandoned mines, cellars, tunnels and other

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underground places, though they may also use warm roof voids as maternity sites. Others are originally tree-roosting species and now take advantage of buildings of many different sorts, where roosts are often associated with the structural timbers.

Legal protection

All bats and their roosts are strictly protected under the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) and the Conservation (Natural Habitats &c.) Regulations 1994 (as amended). Deliberately capturing, disturbing, injuring and killing bats is prohibited, as is damaging or destroying their breeding sites and resting places (roosts). All bats are European protected species; Bechstein's bat and the barbastelle are Annex II species, for which Natura 2000 sites (SACs) have been declared. (Note that this is a simplified summary of the legislation; see other texts for details).

Bats and agri-environment schemes

As most farm buildings are likely to exhibit several of the features that bats favour for roosting, we recommend that a bat survey is commissioned for virtually all farm buildings before major works, such as renovation or conversion to other uses, are planned.

If bat roosts are present, it may be possible to arrange the work in such a way as to avoid committing offences, though in some cases it may be necessary to apply for a licence from Natural England. Further details of the licensing process are available on our website.

Hedgerow trees should normally be retained as part of an Environmental Stewardship agreement. Any felling or other tree work such as crown reduction should be agreed in advance with your adviser and you will need to ensure that the tree is not used as a bat roost.

Felling and other tree work should follow Forestry Commission guidance. Before commencing any tree or woodland work that involves felling, please refer to good practice guidance on the Forestry Commission England website www.forestry.gov.uk/eps.

ES options and capital items where surveys are recommended include:

- Maintenance and restoration of woodland (HC7 and HC8);
- Tree surgery (TS1 and TS2); and
- Restoration of historic buildings (HTB).

Bats hunt wherever insects are plentiful, though species have their own preferences. Particularly favoured places include wetlands of all types, cattle-grazed pasture (for species that eat dung beetles), parkland, along high hedgerows and along woodland edges. ELS and HLS prescriptions that preserve or recreate these features will help bats.

To reach their feeding areas from their roosts, bats often choose to fly along linear features such as hedgerows, treelines and even fences. This is probably because bats sonar has a fairly short range and they do not like to lose contact with features that help them navigate. ELS and HLS prescriptions that preserve or recreate these features will help bats, though hedges and treelines should be favoured over fences as they also provide feeding opportunities.

Further information

If you have internet access please read European protected species: frequently asked questions at www.naturalengland.org.uk/conservation/wildlife-management-licensing/habsregs.htm.

Contact us

For questions regarding Wildlife Licensing please telephone 0845 6014523 (local rate) or email: wildlife@naturalengland.org.uk

If you have any concerns about your agri-environment agreement and its impact on bats please contact your local Natural England adviser. If you do not know your local adviser or for any other enquiries please contact the Natural England Helpline on 0845 600 3078 or email: enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk.

Natural England Information Notes are available to download from the Natural England website: www.naturalengland.org.uk

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References

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