Bats

Ecology

In the UK, there are 17 breeding species of bats, all quite small. Bats are nocturnal, emerging from roosts at dusk to forage, breed and socialise.

Bats roost and hibernate in different locations throughout the year, usually returning to the same roosts annually. Unlike birds, bats do not create nests but use features which are already suitable for their use. Most bats evolved to roost in trees or caves, however they have adapted to a changing landscape and now can also be found roosting in buildings, tunnels and bridges.

From October onwards, bats begin to enter torpor during cold spells, which become longer, until full hibernation begins. This lasts through the winter, with bats re-emerging in spring to feed and replace their depleted fat reserves. All of our native bats eat insects and a pipistrelle bat can consume over 3000 insects in one night.

In May, females form maternity colonies and look for suitable nursery sites, while males roost singly or in small numbers. In June, females usually give birth to a single pup, which they suckle for about six weeks.

By September, the maternity colonies disband and mating season begins again. After mating, females store sperm and delay pregnancy until after the coming hibernation period.

Habitat and distribution

UK bat distribution varies by species. However, some of our more common species are found nationwide, including in urban areas.

Bats need a healthy source of insect prey and suitable roosting opportunities, with good connectivity between those areas. In growing urban areas, residential gardens offer a good number of insects, while buildings provide potential roosting opportunities.

In rural locales, mature woodland provides an abundance of roosting and foraging opportunities for bats, with countryside hedgerows acting as commuting corridors.

Why are bats protected?

Bats experience a number of threats, many of them from interactions with humans. Natural habitats have declined rapidly in the past century, and intensive farming practices have reduced insect prey numbers.

While some species of bats have adapted to the loss of woodland by roosting in buildings, they are now at risk from building and development work. If a maternity colony or particularly rare species is affected, this can be catastrophic for the local bat population.

Other threats include predation by cats, chemical treatments, inappropriate lighting that deters bats from key areas, and wind turbines.

The law

All species of bat are fully protected under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2010 and under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended).

You may commit a criminal offence if you:

- Deliberately capture, injure or kill a bat;
- Intentionally or recklessly disturb a bat in its roost or deliberately disturb a group of bats;
- Damage or destroy the breeding or resting place (roost) of a bat;
- Possess a bat (alive or dead), or any part of a bat;
- Intentionally or recklessly obstruct access to a bat roost;
- Possess a bat, or any part of it, unless acquired lawfully;
- Sell, barter, exchange or transport or offer for sale bats or parts of them.

Disturbing a bat occupying a roost, by noise, vibration and artificial lighting, can lead to prosecution. Penalties include fines of £5000 per bat, imprisonment, and the seizure of equipment.

Local Planning Authorities will often ask for a bat survey to be undertaken as part of planning if the proposed development has the potential to impact on bats or their habitats. It should be noted that developments that are not subject to planning permission are still subject to the above legislation.