

Bat Guidance

Bat Conservation

Bats are a small component of Northern Ireland's biodiversity but an important one, fully protected by law. They have been recognised as a key indicator species of the health of our environment and are an iconic species of our night skies.

There are 17 species of bats in the UK, 8 of which can be found in Northern Ireland. Bat populations have witnessed dramatic declines across the province in recent decades due to the loss and/or damage to sites that they use as roosts. Development, pollution and the application of pesticides with a resultant reduction in the abundance of their prey species are also contributing factors.

Legislation

All species of bats receive full protection in Northern Ireland under the Conservation (Nature Habitats etc.) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1995. It is illegal for anyone to intentionally kill, injure or handle a bat, whether alive or dead or to disturb a bat when roosting without a licence from the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA). Bats may be moved when they are in danger. Gloves must be worn to protect against bites. At all other times, a licence is required to handle a bat.

Any sites where bats are present can only be worked on with the consent and supervision of the NIEA. You can contact them to request a 'roost visit' which will determine if bats are present or not and they will provide the necessary advice and support.



Brown long-eared bats on timber joints © JJ Kazanow, Bat Conservation Trust

Bat Basics

Bats are most active in the months from April to October. They generally hibernate in the months outside this although they can come out of torpor to feed. Bats hibernate in mixed groups in environments that have a constant and cool temperature. During the summer months, females congregate together in maternity roosts that may or may not be hibernation roosts. Roosts can be found in the following places:

- Built structures – barns, houses, bridges, tunnels etc.
- Underground – mines and caves
- Trees – in crevices, holes and under bark

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Threats

Renovations and building works:
Bats are extremely vulnerable and sensitive to human activity. Roost sites can be destroyed via major works such as structural work to bridges but also by simple remedial works such as the replacement of fascia boards or roofing tiles that may result in blocking access to roost sites. Blocking access to a roost or destroying or damaging a roost not only prevents bats from returning the next year, it can also trap bats inside causing them to starve and die. Bats may suffer injuries, abandon young in maternity roosts or be poisoned by toxic timber treatments. Whether bats are present in a roost or not, it is illegal to block access to a roost without a licence from the NIEA.

Loss of habitats and flightlines:
The environment and countryside is always undergoing change – both natural and human-influenced. However, recent decades has seen acceleration in the changing face of

our countryside. Agricultural improvements and building developments have resulted in the loss of habitats across Northern Ireland. Bats depend upon woodlands, unmanaged grassland, hedgerows and waterways for feeding and navigating.

Reduction in prey species:
The loss of habitats and the use of pesticides and intensive farming practices as well as pollution have resulted in a reduction in the abundance of insects that bats are reliant on as a food source.

Lighting:
Lighting in the vicinity of a bat roost that causes disturbance to bats, could constitute an offence. Inappropriate lighting can disturb a roost but also alter the behaviour of bats in relation to feeding, socialisation and mortality. It's important therefore to seek advice on lighting proposals in the vicinity of bat activity and roosts.

Don't	Do
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Disturb a roost -Obstruct access to a roost -Remove trees that may be the location of a roost -Handle a bat unless it is in immediate danger. If you must handle a bat, ensure you wear gloves to protect against bites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Stop work and advise your supervisor if you suspect bats are in your area of work -Inform relevant staff/contractors of the presence of any roosts that need to be accommodated -Work with a specialist consultant on any mitigation work

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Bat Signs

Bats don't make nests or cause structural damage. Hibernation results in minimal bat activity, making their presence or absence difficult to detect. Bat droppings are a useful indicator – these are roughly the same size and shape as mouse droppings, but they crumble to a powder when dry. Droppings are generally found stuck to walls or windowsills, or in small piles beneath where the bats hang or beneath the roost exit. However, bat droppings may be absent outside a roost or not visible if the roost is in a cavity.



Viaduct at Three Mile Water

Best Practice

If you encounter bats in the workplace, contact NIEA immediately. Also, the Bat Conservation Trust has developed a series of guidance sheets for industry such as 'Bats and Lighting' and 'Bats in Bridges'. These are available to download from their website, as per below. 'The Design Manual for Roads and Bridges' (Vol 10, Section 4, Part 3) by the Highways Agency is excellent on the topic of

management and mitigation and can be downloaded for free from The Stationary Office's website.

Timing

Surveys:

Hibernation sites can be surveyed from November to March. At some caves and cave-like sites (which may include some buildings), 'swarming' occurs. This is when bats, usually males with a few females, of the genus *Myotis* and *Plecotus* congregates at sites broadly from August to October. Surveys may be undertaken in April or October when species are shifting between activity/hibernation and vice-versa although NIEA prefers activity surveys to be undertaken from May to September'

Mitigation:

After a survey by a bat consultant deemed acceptable to the NIEA, works can be undertaken on hibernation roosts from June to August well outside the time they are in use. Works on maternity roosts, which are only used in the summer, can safely take place from mid-September to mid-March, preferably November to February.

Useful Web Links:

Northern Ireland Environment Agency
www.ni-environment.gov.uk
Northern Ireland Bat Group (NI)
www.bats-ni.org.uk
Bat Conservation Trust (UK)
www.bats.org.uk
Bat Conservation Ireland (Rep. of Irl.)
www.batconservationireland.org
Natural England's 'Bat Mitigation Guidelines'
www.naturalengland.org.uk
The Stationary Office
www.tso.co.uk

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