

Feeding areas for bats

Bats are found at most National Trust properties. Providing insect food for bats is as important as providing roosting places. For Managers of woodland, farmland, parkland, gardens, Regional/Country Nature Conservation Advisers

Key points

- Our native bats feed principally on flying insects, often in areas where they form large aggregations.
- Providing feeding areas for bats is vital for their future conservation, preferably in areas close to the roosting sites. A landscape view is more useful than small scale.
- The National Trust has a significant proportion of the UK's rarest bats on its properties.
- Small changes to management practices can produce great rewards for feeding bats.

1. BACKGROUND

National Trust property is home to some of the country's rarest bats. All UK bats are insect-eaters and the 17 different species are selective – some taking moths, others flies or beetles of various species. The insects are found in different habitats and some of the most favoured are associated with meadow, parkland, orchard, water and woodland. Bats select areas, too, where the insect abundance is high, such as in sheltered areas and around ponds and lake margins. Many insects are tied to vegetation for their breeding cycles and food supplies, but some are associated with livestock such as dung beetles and with water such as caddis flies and chironomids, which are favoured food for some bat species.

2. POSITION

The National Trust has a general policy to safeguard the wildlife found around its properties. It realises that protecting the roosting places of bats alone will not ensure a healthy population, but feeding areas are important, too.

National Trust Act 1907.

The National Trust was established in 1895 for the “permanent preservation for the benefit of the nation of lands and tenements (including buildings) of beauty or scientific interest and as regards lands for the preservation...of their natural aspect features and animal and plant life”.

A position statement of the Agricultural section states it wishes to “reduce environmental impact of agriculture and realise the environmental potential of its farmland.”

3. ACTION

Incorporating the following, or some of the following, in management plans will help to safeguard or improve bats' feeding opportunities.

Woodland

- Mixed woodland with high structural diversity has greatest diversity of insect species and greater prey availability.

- Insects aggregate along wide fire-breaks, in glades and along woodland edges, especially where the ground flora is diverse and not cut too short or around damp areas.
- A pond will act like a magnet for insects, and allow bats to drink, too.

Farmland

- Diversity of crops results in diversity in insects
- Wide field margins provide a breeding areas for insects
- Hedgerows and copses provide shelter as well as more insect species
- Ponds attract insects and provide more insect diversity
- Livestock dung is essential for dung beetles and flies which are the prey of horseshoe, noctule and serotine bats.
- Orchards can have good insect numbers if the crops are not chemically treated and the grassland beneath is grazed by livestock.
- Pesticides may adversely affect bats either by directly reducing their food supply or when they consume insect prey as amounts of pesticides may be present.
- Dung heaps attract insects and make good feeding places for bats.

Parkland

- Grazed pasture will produce many insects for bats in a parkland setting.
- Trees provide feeding perches – horseshoe bats hang up, fly-catch an insect then return to their perch.

Waterside

- Shelter formed by trees and hedges around large water bodies on the windward side allows insect numbers to build up.
- Detritus in the water from leaves is necessary for the breeding cycle of caddis flies and chironomids.
- Open water is better for a specialist feeder like the Daubenton's bat, rather than a weed-covered surface.
- Heavily fish-stocked – trout waters will have fewer aquatic insects available for bats. Trust policy is one of natural wild fisheries where possible.

Gardens

- Shelter created by dense hedges and borders enables swarms of night-flying insects to build up.
- Walled gardens provide shelter for insect swarms, and the heat retained by the walls produces more active insects.
- Diversity of plants provides diversity of insects associated with them. Night-scented plants attract night-flying insects.
- Ponds, streams and lakes attract insects and, therefore, bats.
- Any pesticides may affect bats either by reducing their food supply or by producing insects containing small doses of harmful poison.

Further information

Bats in the Garden leaflet. Bat Conservation Trust 020 7627 2629

Biodiversity Action Plans for bats on farmland, in woodland: contact Bat Conservation Trust 020 7627 2629

FWAG leaflet: Bats and Farms www.fwag.org.uk

NT Guidance Note on avermectins ("A new position on the use of anti-parasitic drugs in livestock").

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Guidance Note No. Bat 13

Date of issue: September 2003