

Fire doors, smoke and burglar alarms at bat roosts

For those experiencing false alarms caused by bats, those checking alarms and fitting and checking fire doors: Building Managers, House Stewards, Security personnel or contractors,, Fire Officers, Property Managers.

Key points

- Bats roosting in roof spaces are protected from disturbance, yet smoke detectors and fire doors need regular checks
- Bats roosting in roof spaces need free access throughout the roof space so fire walls should be fitted with doors.
- Movement alarms in a property may be set off by a bat at night and this needs to be prevented.

1. BACKGROUND

- Bats have been found in most National Trust properties, often in roof spaces.
- For fire-spread precautions, fire walls may need to be fitted between adjacent attic spaces and these could restrict or exclude bats, all of which are protected by law.
- Occasionally, particularly in autumn when juvenile bats are flying, individual bats manage to enter the main areas of buildings where they fly around setting off alarms.
- Smoke alarms and fire doors in roof spaces need regular maintenance checks, but roosting bats should not be disturbed.

2. POSITION

The National Trust welcomes the wildlife associated with its buildings, but also has a need to protect buildings against both burglars and the spread of fire. Usually both can be achieved with careful planning and co-operation.

3. ACTION

Fire doors:

Fire walls are designed to slow or prevent the spread of fire through large connected roof voids. Bats commonly roost in many areas of a void and move regularly between different locations in the same roof. Fire walls will limit this movement. One possible solution used in a number of properties is to have fire doors held open using electro-magnetic stops, but automatically released to close if the smoke detectors in the roof void are activated, or, in a few cases where excessive heat is detected. Another system using bi-metallic strip triggers is to have small metal-lined apertures set into the fire-wall with a metal shutter that falls in case of fire. It is important to have a 72 hour back-up battery power system in case of power cuts. The doors should be connected to a security system to warn if they are closed. The system should be outside the regular fire alarm testing regime and, like smoke alarms, only tested annually when the bats are absent: in roof spaces this will usually be in winter.

Since protected bats could be disturbed by the fitting of a fire-wall and door, advice must be first sought from the statutory nature conservation organisation (SNCO) – English Nature, Countryside Council for Wales or Environment and Heritage Service for Northern Ireland. Bats

are not always obvious, so if such work is planned it would be sensible to have a bat survey carried out at an early stage of the planning process.

Checking and testing of smoke alarms and fire doors should be done at a time when the bats are absent, so in a roof space a winter check would be best. Bats are protected by law from disturbance. In sensitive roosts there may be other restrictions on entry, monitored by the Property Manager. In some cases a defence could be that the disturbance was an incidental result of a lawful activity, and if great care was taken not to unduly disturb bats roosting nearby, that defence may hold. Timing of the visit to coincide with a period of bat absence would still be best.

Burglar alarms:

Alarms being set off indoors without obvious reason could be due to a bat. A bat may fly around in a room for a while then rest or move to another room. Inspections may, therefore, not find the bat. If bats are responsible then possible solutions are:

Reset the alarm sensor to be less sensitive or change the detection angle, as bats tend to fly around just below the ceiling.

Fit a "dual-tec" system such as microwave and passive infra-red detectors, or two infra-red detectors set apart, but surveying the same area. Only large objects in their common field of view will trigger the alarm.

Use pressure pads around doors or windows in affected areas rather than other alarm triggers.

Prevent the bat from entering the living area of the house (this does not require any licence, as long as the bat is not harmed) by firstly noting which room registered the first alarm, then blocking up all 15mm or more gaps around skirting boards, floorboards, pipes, windows, ceilings, chimneys and around closed doors. Occasionally bats roosting in the hollow sections of sash window frames may squeeze between the frame and the wall to gain access. Commonly, bats roosting in the roof void move down the cavities between walls until they feel a draught or see light where floor timbers or pipes penetrate the inner wall, then they squeeze through. In some situations it may be more satisfactory to block off the route downwards into the structure from the attic: this would need to be done by a bat worker having sought advice from the SNCO.

Some false alarms may be triggered by insects entering the sensor, or faulty equipment.

Bats in the living area of a house can be carefully taken outside in a gloved hand and released (no licence required). To catch the bat wait until it has finished flying around and watch where it lands (often in the pleats of a curtain). Wait five minutes for it to become torpid then reach up with a cloth or gloved hand and wrap your hand around the bat, unhook it and take it outside. Hang it up on an outside wall or release it directly if it wishes to fly.

Further information

References:

Fire Standards Manual, compartmentation, Section 3, Appendix 3.A.

Bat Workers' Manual (JNCC 1999), p83.

Guidance Notes on Bats Indoors, Bats and the Law.

Safety Note, H&S department, No 7/2002, Contact with Bats

Model Risk Assessment WRK 025, 06.12.2002 Handling of Bats

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