

# Bat Conservation Trust



## Hooking bats! – the fishermen's friend, the Daubenton's bat

*Bats and fishermen both enjoy the dusk and occasionally they may have an inadvertent close encounter! The **Bat Conservation Trust (BCT)** gives more information about bats and explains what to do if you catch one whilst fishing.*

So, there you are at the beginning of the angling season, putting on your first team of flies and practising your new casting techniques, when no sooner do you cast out than you get a bite. All that hard work has paid off in an instant. However, you notice that the line is moving strangely, so you start to reel in and gaze towards the end of the line and realise that what you've got is a bat!

### **Lure of the line**

Anglers often get in contact with us to convey tales of bats seen swarming around bridges and trees, crawling on river banks, or getting caught on the line, albeit accidentally. Daubenton's bats in particular are frequently seen skimming the surface of rivers, ponds or other water bodies at dusk.

There are 17 bat species in the UK: the commonest are common and soprano pipistrelles, which measure just 4-5cm in length and are the bats most likely to be seen flitting around in the garden or roosting in houses. The rarest is the greater mouse-eared, which until recently was considered extinct in the UK: the same individual has been found hibernating in Sussex over the past few winters. Bats in the UK eat only insects, which they catch in flight or pick off water, foliage or the ground. The pipistrelle can eat up to 3,000 midges in one night – one-third of its body weight!

Daubenton's bats take insects, particularly chironomid midges and mayflies, from close to the water surface. They are medium-sized bats (45-55 mm long, with a 240-275 mm wingspan and weighing 7-12 g), with a steady flight pattern, flying at approximately 25 kph, often within a few centimetres of the water surface, and reminiscent of a small hovercraft. They have even been seen taking prey directly from the water surface, using their large feet as a gaff or their tail membrane as a scoop. They usually feed within 6 km of the roost but have been recorded following canals for up to 10 km. Their old name of 'water bat' is quite appropriate, though they often travel across land and occasionally feed away from water.

All bats are able to fly and feed in the dark by producing a stream of high-frequency calls and listening to the returning echoes which give a distinct 'sound picture' of their surroundings. This is called echolocation. The sounds bats produce can normally only be heard by humans through use of high frequency equipment such as an electronic bat detector.

### **Precautions**

Despite this amazing ability to fly in the dark and catch tiny insects moving amongst the branches and leaves, bats occasionally mistake artificial fishing flies for the real thing. Often it's a wingtip or the tail membrane that gets caught as you are casting, but occasionally bats are hooked in the mouth. So what do you do next? First of all, don't panic. Whilst there is a small risk that bats may carry rabies, there are simple steps you can take to protect yourself and others.

If possible, try to 'land' the bat on the riverbank where it may be able to free itself from the line. Do not allow a hooked bat to continue flying around on the end of a line for longer than is necessary and if it does not free itself within 2-3 minutes you may wish to cut the line close to the fly.

Avoid touching the bat with bare hands. A small proportion of bats in the UK carry a rabies-type virus, which can be transmitted through a bite or scratch or through contact between its saliva and an open wound or the mucous membranes of your eye, nose or mouth. If you need to handle the bat (alive or dead), wear protective gloves or wrap as much of the bat as possible in a cloth, especially the head and mouth. If you think you may have been bitten or scratched by a bat, wash the wound immediately and thoroughly (preferably with soap and water, and without scrubbing) and speak to your doctor as soon as you can – effective post-exposure vaccination is available.

At this stage, or at any time if you are unsure of what to do, you can contact the Bat Conservation Trust helpline on 0845 1300 228.

### **Rabies in the UK**

Some bats in Europe carry a rabies-type virus called European Bat Lyssavirus (EBLV). This is different from classical rabies, which has never been found in a bat in Europe, and has two strains; EBLV1 and EBLV2.

In the UK, ten bats have been found with the EBLV2 live virus: eight in England and two in Scotland. All were Daubenton's bats.

In addition, three bats have tested positive for EBLV1 antibodies: a serotine in the south of England and two Natterer's bats in Scotland. The presence of antibodies indicates previous exposure to the virus.

To put these numbers into perspective, since 1987, the [Veterinary Laboratories Agency](#) has undertaken a passive surveillance programme in which dead bats, sent in by members of the public and bat workers, are tested for the virus. In this time over 9,000 UK bats have been tested for EBLV and less than 0.1% were positive.

Fishermen can help improve our understanding of rabies in bats by contributing to this research programme; if you find a dead bat, please contact BCT so we can arrange for it to be tested. The discovery of EBLV in UK bats does not affect the UK's rabies-free status.

The risk of catching the virus from a bat is extremely low. Any human contact with bats is rare, even when they share the same buildings. As EBLV is only transmitted by a bite or scratch or through contact with saliva, there is no risk to people if they do not approach or handle a bat. Bats are not aggressive, although, like any wild animal, if handled they may bite to defend themselves. A bat that appears to be baring its teeth is actually 'scanning' you by echolocation. If you are exposed to EBLV there is an effective treatment, provided this is administered soon after infection.

### **Conservation**

Due to significant decline in numbers over the past few decades, mainly through loss of habitat and disturbance, all bats and their roosts are fully protected by law in the UK and Europe. In summary, it is illegal to kill, injure, take or disturb bats, or to damage, destroy or obstruct access to bat roosts

BCT is the only national organisation solely devoted to the conservation of bats and their habitats in the UK. BCT works with local bat groups and bat workers, to survey roosts and hibernation sites, and work with householders, builders, farmers and foresters to protect bats. Monitoring is essential, as it would seem that many of our bat species have declined dramatically over the last 60 years. The data

collected allows us to identify population changes and assess the bats' conservation needs. Resources can then be directed to where they are most needed.

For more information about bats, the law, and BCT, please visit our website: [www.bats.org.uk](http://www.bats.org.uk). Alternately, contact the Bat Helpline on 0845 1300 228, through which we provide advice to all who come into contact with bats.