

# Good Practice Guide: protecting bats during woodland management and forestry operations

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If you are relying on following good practice to keep within the law, then you:

- **must** take [preventative measures to protect bats](#)
- **should** follow as many of the [Top 5 actions to improve habitat for bats](#) as you can.

## Introduction

Woodland bats in Wales are a diverse and ecologically important group, with all 14 breeding bat species found in Wales using woodland habitats for roosting, foraging, or commuting. These include both widespread species such as Pipistrelles, Noctules and Brown Long-eared, and some of our rarest species which can be reliant on woodlands such as Leisler's, Bechstein's and the Lesser Horseshoe Bat.

One such specialist woodland bat is the Barbastelle Bat (*Barbastella barbastellus*). It is one of the rarest mammals in Wales and the UK. Its status in Wales is classified as Vulnerable. The species is widely but sparsely distributed across southern Wales, the borders and potentially parts of northwest Wales. It is likely to be significantly under-recorded due to its elusive nature and reliance on woodlands which are rarely surveyed for bats. Conservation efforts are focused on protecting and enhancing suitable woodland habitats, monitoring of known colonies and searching for new colonies which may be lost before we know they exist.

Tree roosting bats move roost very regularly and they need a wide selection of roosts that provide various microclimatic conditions and can be used at different times of the year for different purposes. For this reason, maintaining potential roosts is very important.

Not all woodlands will have the same potential to support bat roosts. Upland conifer plantations may be expected to have lower potential than mature lowland broadleaf woodlands. Younger trees are also less likely to have developed features capable of supporting bat roosts.

However, regardless of age, species or location, any tree that contains cracks, splits, woodpecker holes, rot holes, hazard beams, loose bark or thick stemmed ivy cover will have potential to support a roost.

When found in a woodland setting, structures like buildings, mines or bridges, or natural features like caves, rock faces and cliffs that contain cracks, crevices or open dark voids are of extremely high potential value to bats. These often provide ideal roosts within high-value foraging habitat and are very likely to be used by bats.

Maintaining woodland volume and roost connectivity is critical for bat conservation, particularly near significant roosts. Breeding females need sufficient woodland to enable them to feed their young close to maternity roosts, and bats also need woodland to allow winter foraging on warmer evenings close to hibernation roosts.

Woodland is also important for 'landscape connectivity' - allowing bats to move through the wider landscape when commuting between roosts or foraging areas. Designing your coupes and planning felling works to maintain habitat connectivity in line with UKFS guidelines will usually achieve this, but sometimes you may need to go a little further, especially if close to a SSSI or SAC designated for bats.

## How are bats protected?

All bats in Wales are European Protected Species (EPS) under the Habitats Regulations.

This means you must work in a way that avoids impacting bats to the extent that it would be an offence, such as deliberately killing or injuring them, deliberately or recklessly disturbing them, particularly if it significantly impacts them or impairs their ability to survive, breed or hibernate.

Damaging or destroying bat roosts could be an offence even if you do not do it deliberately. This could be through direct harm such as felling a tree containing a roost, or by indirect harm such as felling all, or most, of the trees surrounding the roost so that the local climatic conditions change and are no longer favourable, even though the roost is physically undamaged. It is therefore vital that you can demonstrate due diligence in checking for and protecting roosts.

Previously used roosts that are not currently active are also protected, if there is a reasonable likelihood that they will be used again in the future.

You can assume that bats use your woodland for some purposes and that they are likely to use any suitable trees as roosts, at least as temporary resting places. Potential roosts need to be maintained to ensure there is no loss of ecological functionality as a result of your operation. However, in some woodlands it may not be feasible to retain them all. In these cases, you should retain as many as possible and ensure that enough remain to allow bats to continue using the area.

If you cannot avoid doing something that would cause an offence by following this guidance, NRW may be able to issue a licence to enable you to carry out your work lawfully. We can only do that if we are confident that there is no satisfactory alternative and that it will not harm the favourable conservation status of the species. Licences can only be issued as a last resort.

This Good Practice Guide has been approved by the Welsh Ministers as guidance under paragraph 43(9)(b) of the Conservation of Habitat and Species Regulations 2017. This

means that a court must take it into account in proceedings relating to the offences of disturbing bats, or the damage and destruction of their breeding sites or resting places.

## Are bats using your woodland?

With the Mammal Society, we have produced a guide [Protected species in woodlands: A field guide for woodland managers in Wales](#), containing specific advice on how to carry out surveys to check for protected species.

## Checking for records

You should check for records of bat roosts in or close to your woodland, and check if your woodland is within 250 metres of a designated site (SSSI or SAC) notified for bats. You should note any location data, descriptions, and the species of bat the records relate to.

If you have applied for a felling licence, NRW will check for records as part of the process and may add information or an environmental condition to your licence if records of bats are found. In most cases, that condition will require that you follow the measures in this good practice guide.

## Walkover survey

The locations of most bat roosts are unknown. Therefore, before undertaking any works, you need to check your woodland for roosts or potential roosts during your walkover survey, even if there are no records of bats.

If you know you have bat roosts in your woodland, it will be particularly important that the person doing the walkover survey has sufficient species-specific competence.

Before you proceed, you will need to have established the following:

1. Whether your work area is in, or within 250 metres of, a **protected site designated for bats**.
2. The location of any **known** or **assumed bat roosts** in, or within 20 metres of, your work area.
3. The location of any trees within your work area that are **potential bat roosts**.
4. Whether there are records, or is other evidence, of Greater Horseshoe Bat, Lesser Horseshoe Bat, or Barbastelle Bat maternity or hibernation roosts within 250 metres of your work area.

If a potential roost appears to be highly suitable (for instance, a building or cave) or has any signs of use, the safest option is either to take a precautionary approach and treat it as an assumed roost, or have a survey carried out by an experienced bat specialist.

If you find that an historic record of a bat roost relates to a tree or structure that is no longer evident on the ground, or one that has clearly lost any potential as a bat roost, you may be able to discount these. However, to protect yourself, you should carefully record

the evidence before you carry out the work. If you do not do this, you may not be able to defend your decision if you are challenged. If you have a felling licence condition relating to a record of a roost that no longer exists, you will need to contact the forest permitting team.

## Preventative measures to protect bats

If you are relying on following this good practice guide to keep within the law, you **must** adhere to the following preventive measures as a minimum.

If you are unable to follow these measures, you will need to take advice from a competent ecologist on whether there are site-specific mitigations that could allow you to work without committing an offence. As a last resort, you may need to consider applying for an EPS licence.

If you unexpectedly find evidence of bats during work, works should cease and you should consider whether you are able to apply the measures in this guide or seek advice from a competent ecologist.

If you are already operating under an EPS licence, you must continue to follow its terms and conditions.

For all woodlands, these preventative measures **must be adhered to**:

### 1. Known or assumed bat roosts

- The roost must not be damaged or destroyed.
- Bats within the roost must not be disturbed
- A windfirm buffer of at least 20 metres must be retained undisturbed around the roost.
- Roosts must not be left isolated within a large, clear-felled area. Retain vegetated corridors of trees or scrub linking to undisturbed areas if bats would need to cross more than 50 metres of clearfell.

### 2. Potential roosts

- You must retain as many potential roosts as possible, ideally with a 20 metre buffer. This means:
  - If there are only a **few potential roosts** (such as veteran trees or standing deadwood within a managed conifer plantation) you must retain them all, as the loss of any would be likely to impact on the ecological functionality of the woodland and be likely to lead to an offence.
  - In woodlands where there is an **abundance of potential roosts** (as may be the case in mature broadleaf or mixed woodland) the loss of some would be unlikely to reduce the ecological functionality. In these cases, you must fell no more than 25% of trees with potential roost features (ideally those with the lowest potential) in any 10-year period.

### 3. Recorded or confirmed maternity or hibernation roosts of greater horseshoe, lesser horseshoe or barbastelle bat

- In addition to applying the measures for known or assumed roosts, felling within 250 metres of these roosts must only be undertaken **with specialist advice**. If there is a record of such a roost and you are applying for a felling licence, this is likely to be addressed through bespoke environmental conditions. In other cases, you will need to seek specific advice from a competent ecologist.

## Top 5 actions to improve habitat for bats

Managing your woodland in line with the UKFS can deliver significant benefits for wildlife. The actions below would be particularly valuable for bats, and will also support many other species:

### 1. Maintain woodland size and integrity

Preserving the overall size of the woodland is crucial for several bat species, especially those that rely on large, undisturbed areas for roosting and foraging.

### 2. Enhance edge habitats

Improve woodland boundaries, rides, glades, and open spaces by promoting a diverse vegetation structure—from scrub and tall grasses to herbaceous plants and short grasses. Overhanging branches and layered vegetation support insect diversity, creating rich foraging grounds for generalist bat species.

### 3. Ensure habitat connectivity

Retain belts of trees to maintain landscape connectivity and between woodland blocks to avoid fragmentation. Corridors such as hedgerows, treelines, and wooded riparian strips are vital for bats, which depend on connected landscapes for safe movement and access to resources.

### 4. Improve understory structure

A well-developed understory with varied plant species provides shelter, supports insect prey, and contributes to overall habitat complexity, benefiting both roosting and foraging bats.

### 5. Retain deadwood and veteran tree

Standing and fallen deadwood, as well as old trees with cavities, are essential for roosting. These features also support a wide range of invertebrates, enhancing food availability for bats.

## What to do if you find evidence of a bat roost unexpectedly during work

Once it is safe to do so, stop any work that could cause further damage or disturbance. If it is undamaged, you should check that you can follow the approach for a known roost in the preventative measures section above before restarting work. If this is not possible, or if the roost has been damaged, you should seek advice from a suitably qualified ecologist.

If a tree has been felled that appears to contain a roost, ensure the tree (or section) is lying so that the roost entrance is not obstructed and any uninjured bats can escape. If injured bats are found, they should be carefully moved to a safe location (e.g. a secure box with small slits for ventilation). You should call the [Bat Conservation Trust's National Bat Helpline at 0345 1300 228](#) for further advice. If you have a suitably qualified ecologist on site, they may be able to help. They may advise you to take the bat to a veterinary practice or bat worker for rehabilitation. You should also inform NRW via the Customer Hub as soon as is reasonably practicable.

If a bat needs to be handled, wear gloves or place a cloth over the bat to minimise the risk of a bite or a scratch, due to the small but present risk of European Bat Lyssavirus (a form of Rabies).

## Further information

You can find more useful information on survey techniques and positive management approaches for bats in:

[Protected species in woodlands: A field guide for woodland managers in Wales – how to survey your woodland for protected species.](#)

[Bat Conservation Trust - Bats and Woodland](#) – a comprehensive guide to bats and woodland management

[Woodland Management for Bats](#), (2005) published by the Forestry Commission for England and Wales in partnership with BCT, CCW and English Nature (Natural England).

[Bat Surveys for Professional Ecologists: Good Practice Guidelines 4th edition - Guidance for professionals - Bat Conservation Trust.](#) National guidelines on how to undertake bat surveys.

[Bat Roosts in Trees – Pelagic Publishing – Bat Tree Habitat Key – Henry Andrews](#) An in-depth book to purchase if you want to learn more about bats roosting habitats in trees.