

Bats, Buildings and Barn Owls

A guide to safeguarding protected species when renovating traditional buildings:



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This leaflet provides important information on protecting bats and barn owls when you are renovating traditional buildings.

A wide range of animals use traditional farm buildings including a number of bat species, barn owl and other nesting birds such as swallow. Works funded under the England Rural Development Programme (ERDP) must proceed in a manner that minimises the risk of disturbing or harming these protected species.

There is a high probability that bats will use certain traditional farm buildings at some point during the year. You should therefore assume that bats are present, even if there are no signs. In high risk situations, where bats are either known or highly likely to occur, it is recommended that a bat survey is carried out prior to the commencement of any works. In certain instances, where disturbance to bats is unavoidable, a DEFRA licence will be required before any works can commence. In any case, ERDP funding should not be used to render a building inhospitable to bats. In other words, after the renovation work has taken place, the building should be left so that bats are able to use it in the future.

You will have to decide whether barn owls are using the building as a roost by following the guidelines in this leaflet.

BATS IN BUILDINGS

Bats probably use most traditional farm buildings at some stage through the year and restoration works must therefore be designed to minimise the risk of harming bats and their roosts.

All bat species are specially protected under Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act of 1981 (as amended).

As a result it is illegal to:

- Intentionally kill, injure or take bats.
- Deliberately disturb bats.
- Damage, destroy or obstruct access to bat roosts.

Bats are also protected under The Conservation (Natural Habitats, & c.) Regulations 1994. In some circumstances, licenses are available from defra to permit actions affecting bats or their roosts, that would normally be prohibited by law.

Bats roost in a wide variety of sites within buildings, with many species roosting in cracks and crevices, within rubble stone walls, under slates and within timber beam joints where they are difficult to see.

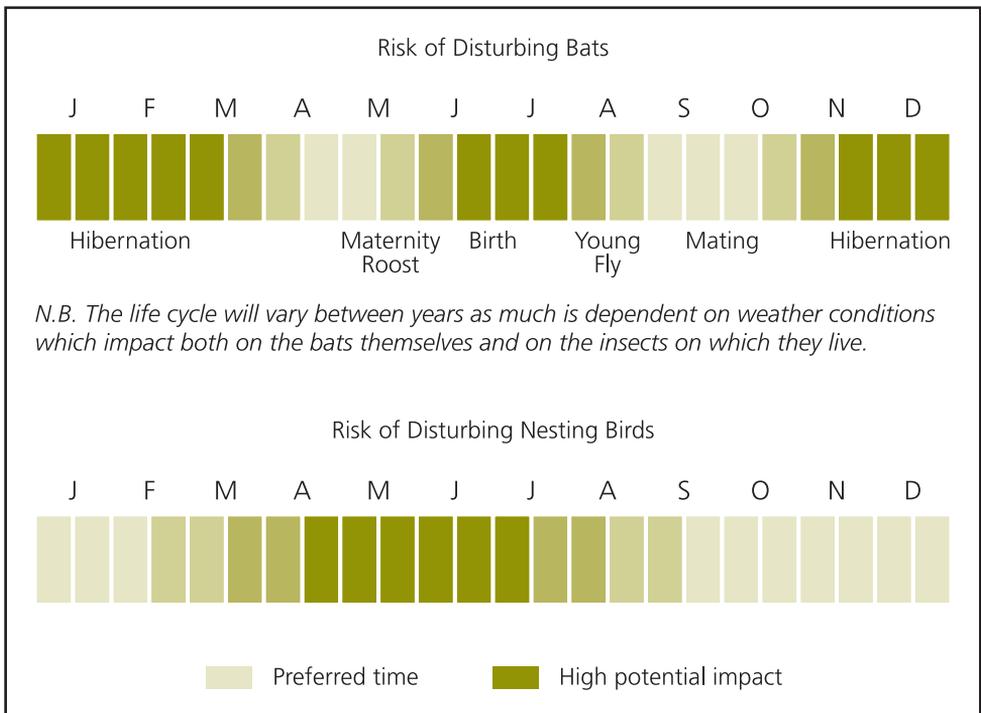
Bats often access barn roosts at key areas such as the gable end, soffits, barge boards, ridge tiles, between double lintels, around window frames and through open joints in the stonework or broken slates.

The presence of roosting bats can be spotted through signs such as accumulations of moth or butterfly wings or bat droppings. These are like mouse droppings, but crumble easily to dust between the fingers. However, the absence of such evidence does not mean that bats are not using the building.



Renovation Work

Bats in barns are vulnerable to disturbance between November and March, when they are hibernating. Works such as repointing or re-roofing in the winter can entomb hibernating bats within the fabric of the walls or crush them before they awake from torpor. Bats that are disturbed and escape in the winter use up a lot of energy, which they cannot replace as there are few insects available as food and they may therefore perish. Therefore the commencement of re-pointing and re-roofing during this period should be avoided.



Renovation Work and Breeding Bats

It is less likely that your building will be used as a **maternity roost**. However bats are very vulnerable once the young have been born, any time from June to August. Obviously if the roost is disturbed at this time, the adults can fly away, but the young will be unable to escape or live without their mothers and will therefore die. Your building is most likely to be used as a maternity roost if it has several of the following “bat attractive” features –

- It is in a more sheltered position.
- There are a number of traditional farm buildings located together.
- The building is close to woodland and mature trees.
- The building is near a stream or river, with scattered trees.

In locations with all or several of these features present, we strongly advise that you arrange for a bat survey to be carried out in the late spring/summer before works commence. Winter surveys for bats are not reliable, as in the winter months, the bats will be hibernating and therefore not flying at night and hidden from view. Your RDS adviser should be able to provide guidance on bat surveys .

Work in the spring risks adversely affecting nesting birds, which are also legally protected. If, for example, swallows nest in the barns to be renovated, measures should be taken to prevent access in the spring to stop nests being established.



Pipistrelle by John Goldsmith

Any contractors involved in renovation works should be informed that bats may use the building at some time of the year and be provided with a copy of this leaflet.



Advice to Builders

- Avoid re-roofing and re-pointing in all barns in the winter months, when bats are hibernating
- Avoid re-roofing during the summer months (May – August) in buildings known to be maternity roosts.
- Remove old slates and roof beams by hand, being aware that bats may be present beneath slates or tiles, within mortise joints, cavity walls and between loose stones.
- If bats are found contact your local English Nature office immediately (see back page). Stop work in that area and if bats are exposed and vulnerable to harm, use gloves or a container to move them to a dark and quiet area of the barn and either hang them up on the wall or leave them in a box for release at dusk.
- Avoid the use of timber treatments that are toxic to mammals. Pre treated timber should only use the CCA (copper, chrome, arsenic) treatment and chemicals used for timber treatment should be based on permethrin and cypermethrin compounds, which should be applied in the spring or autumn.
- To allow bats access to roost sites, at least ten deep vertical gaps in the stonework near to the eaves should be retained on each side of the building, to allow access to the rubble fill/cavity. Such gaps should be from 20-40mm wide and 40-80mm long or re-pointed to create such a gap.
- If clean, smooth stonework is found associated with a gap in the masonry, it is more likely that it is being used by bats. Therefore the gap should be kept open by placing a roll of newspaper 25mm in diameter, angled upwards into the gap and applying mortar around the paper. The newspaper can then be removed before the mortar is fully set, to leave a weather-proof access route.
- Areas of masonry under the eaves should be left unpointed, or re-pointed using the techniques outlined above to create weather-proof routes into the rubble fill of the walls, as potential roost and hibernation sites.
- Use of rough sawn board sarking at the ridge can provide further roosting opportunities.
- In some circumstances, licenses are available from defra to permit actions affecting bats or their roosts, that would normally be prohibited by law. Advice on this should be sought.

With the incorporation of these measures into renovation work, the risk of disturbing or harming bats and their roosts can be minimised.



BARN OWLS IN BUILDINGS

The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 protects all birds, their nests and eggs. Barn owls are listed on Schedule 1, which gives them special protection, making it an offence to disturb birds at the nest.

It is an offence to:

- Intentionally kill, injure or take any wild barn owl
- Intentionally take, damage or destroy any wild barn owl nest while in use or being 'built'
- Intentionally take or destroy a wild barn owl egg
- Have in one's possession or control a wild barn owl (dead or alive), or egg, unless one can show that it was obtained legally
- Intentionally or recklessly disturb any wild barn owl whilst 'building' a nest or whilst in, on, or near a nest containing eggs or young
- Intentionally or recklessly disturb any dependent young, wild barn owls

The penalty for an offence under the Act is a fine of up to £5000 and/or imprisonment for up to six months

Before any work commences applicants need to check for signs of barn owl presence.

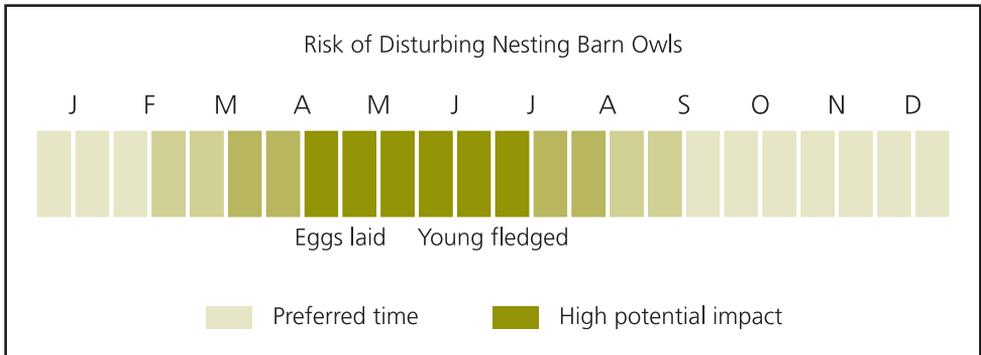
Field signs including droppings, pellets, feathers and suitable nest sites. Droppings are most likely to be found under perch sites and appear as large white splashes on a hard surface or smaller white patches on old hay or straw. Their presence is not definitive, as similar white droppings are produced by various bird species.

Pellets, the regurgitated indigestible parts of the barn owl's prey, often accumulate in places where the birds regularly roost. Many birds produce such pellets, but the barn owls are easily distinguishable, being black and glossy when fresh, a couple of inches long and containing fur and small mammal bones. They are a reliable indicator that owls are present. Barn owl feathers, showing variation in size and colour, but generally being white grading to a pale, golden colour, are also a reliable sign of barn owls.

If there are indications that barn owl may use the barn, then specialist advice is required from an ecologist or an organisation such as the Barn Owl Trust (01364 653026).

Renovation Work

Traditional agricultural buildings provide many barn owl nest sites. The renovation of such buildings ensures that they are preserved, but barn owls must be protected during the works.



The following elements should be considered if barn owls are present:

- Avoid the breeding/nesting season (March to August). Although, active nests have been found in every month of the year, so a precautionary approach should be considered. Where fresh pellets are found it should be assumed the birds are breeding until it can be proved otherwise.
- Prior to work commencing, alternative roost and nest sites should be provided in the form of nest boxes. These should be situated in sites where there is some evidence of barn owl occupation.
- Provision of alternative roost and nest sites for owls and other works should be completed by January, allowing the birds time to settle prior to egg-laying

Work should, where possible, be carried out to maintain the roost site, as barn owls show a great deal of site loyalty and will return to the same roost site for many years, given the opportunity. The presence of resident barn owls can give a site a great public appeal as part of a farm diversification project.



Illustration by Richard Yardley

Attracting Barn Owls

In sites where barn owls are not present, there may be opportunities to attract barn owls to the area by the following -

- Provision of nest boxes within the loft space, made to the specifications outlined in the English Nature booklet - "Barn Owls on Site – A Guide for Developers". The boxes should be situated such that an owl entering the building through the most likely opening, will see the box entrance hole.
- Creation or maintenance of an access point into the loft space at least 20cm by 20cm and 3m above ground level, facing away from the prevailing wind, avoiding obstructions such as trees and overhead wires. The entrance hole should overlook open countryside and be visible to any passing birds.
- Provision of an external perch or landing platform will allow young birds room to exercise their wings before their first flight.

The cost of incorporating provision for barn owls in a traditional building is very small, with the materials for a new nest box typically costing between £10 and £35, depending on the type of box. The works may be included as part of the funding package.



Barns Owls by Kevin Katley courtesy of the Barn Owl Trust

This leaflet provides guidance only and it remains your responsibility to meet statutory regulations.

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