

Bat Conservation Trust



Good Practice Guidelines on Bats and Rabies

This information is designed for use by those giving advice about bats

(Rev. August 2020)

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Introduction

In conjunction with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) and various public health agencies, the Bat Conservation Trust (BCT) reviews health and safety issues for bat workers on bats and rabies.

This is the August 2020 edition of this Good Practice Guidelines document. The revisions related to a soprano pipistrelle testing positive for a lyssavirus (the specific type could not be confirmed) but there is no evidence to support this case being anything other than a spill-over from a reservoir species, most probably from a co-roosting serotine.

Whilst we all acknowledge that the risk of catching bat rabies from a UK bat is small, we do need to follow good practice, not only to make bat work as safe as possible, but also to be responsible proponents of bat conservation.

Note to Bat Groups: *It is important that bat workers are made aware of these guidelines. You should try to ensure that they are distributed to all bat workers in your Bat Group. Although we appreciate that the Bat Group has no control over individual bat workers and cannot be responsible for their actions or personal safety, it is important that they are not exposed to unnecessary risks to their health and safety. Please, therefore, ensure that you distribute this edition of these guidelines to members of your Group.*

Note to Bat Workers: *Bat workers should carefully read and follow these guidelines. Although the risk of rabies remains small, it is important that you take all reasonable precautions to guard against it. These Guidelines set out important procedures and you should follow them.*

Individuals answering calls about bats from members of the public should be trained and know about bats and their behaviour. They should also be familiar with the UK network of bat groups, bat carers and the Statutory Nature Conservation Organisations. An up-to-date list of relevant contacts and telephone numbers should be kept with this document.

You should familiarise yourself with Sections 1, 2, and both procedures in Section 3 before you use them. If you have any questions about the following pages please contact the BCT Helpline (0345 1300 228).

Definitions

In this document **bitten*** should be taken to mean bitten or scratched, or there has been a bat's saliva in contact with mucous membranes or existing cuts. It is very difficult to safely assess whether or not the skin is broken. The assumption should be made that if scratched/bitten then the skin was broken.

Protective gloves** means gloves appropriate for the size of the bat and the process being carried out. See the BCT document "Wearing gloves when you handle bats" available from the BCT website on the [Rabies page](#) and the [Resources for Bat Groups page](#).

Vaccinated carer or handler*** means a bat worker or bat carer who is up to date with their pre-exposure rabies vaccinations.

Good Practice

General

1. Anyone who handles bats regularly should be fully vaccinated against rabies. These vaccinations are free of charge to those handling bats purely in a voluntary capacity. Please refer to the [BCT Special Edition Bulletin published on 7th August 2020](#) for further information. Where bat handling is required as part of a professional job (such as environmental consultancy) the employer is responsible for payment (even where the person is also a volunteer).
2. Protective gloves should be worn when handling bats **of any species**, even if you have received rabies vaccinations. It may be possible for experienced bat workers to use a towel or cloth, as explained on the BCT factsheet "Wearing gloves when you handle bats" available from the BCT website on the [Rabies page](#) and the [Resources for Bat Groups page](#).
3. Anyone who is bitten or scratched by a bat **of any species** must wash the wound immediately with soap and water for at least five minutes. Additional cleansing of the wound site with an alcohol base or other disinfectant (e.g. iodine solution) is also recommended. Then they should contact their GP for advice straight away, even if they are already vaccinated. The relevant Government Agency should also be contacted (see "Animal health issues" table on page 8) to ensure that the correct procedures are followed.
4. Bat workers who do not have up-to-date rabies immunisation should not be sent out on bat group or BCT business that is likely to involve handling bats (e.g. grounded or injured bat calls) unless they are in training and under direct supervision.
5. If you need to take a grounded or injured bat to the vet, please remind your vet of the small risk of rabies in UK bats.
6. Bats used for PR purposes at events or shown to the public should not be handled by members of the public. The bat worker who is presenting the bats should wear protective gloves when handling bats.
7. BCT advises that Daubenton's bats and serotines are not used for public events/shows.
8. In publicity material for events of bat group work (including newsletters and social media), photographs showing bats held in bare hands should not be used.
9. Anyone who takes in grounded and injured bats must record the following details:
 - Contact details of the individual that brought the bat to them
 - Date when the bat was brought in

- Contact details of the individual that originally found the bat
- Date when the bat was found
- Place where the bat was found
- Details of any known animal involvement (e.g. cats)
- Details of the bat, and the nature of any injuries and treatment
- Details of any biting or scratching incident (human or animal)

Bat handlers must be able to match each bat up with its records. BCT has forms for recording the details of grounded and injured bats; please contact the National Bat Helpline if you require one (enquiries@bats.org.uk). Please tell your local vets/RSPCA/SSPCA officers this if they are likely to receive injured bats.

Isolation

All bats suitable for eventual release should be kept isolated from other individuals (unless they are from the same known roost) because of the risk of between-bat transmission of EBLV (the soprano pipistrelle positive for a lyssavirus was likely the result of a spill-over from another species). Separate gloves, to prevent disease transmission, should be used when handling different bats; separate tweezers and other equipment should also be considered.

This is particularly important for any Daubenton's bats and serotines in care but because of the risk of between species spill-over is relevant for all species. As a minimum Daubenton's bats and serotines should be kept in separate cages, with separate gloves and equipment used for that individual only.

It is recommended that any equipment should be sterilised after use. Bleach diluted 1 part bleach to 30 parts water can be used to prevent disease transmission. Iodine based disinfectants or general purpose quaternary ammonium compound disinfectants can also be used for surfaces (the APHA field staff use Virkon (DuPont) disinfectant, which is available from various suppliers including online from Amazon and other retailers). Clothing should be washed with detergents at 40°C and dried.

Further information is available in the "Supplement to Good Practice Guidelines for Bat Rehabilitators: Managing Disease Risk" available from the BCT website on the [Resources for Bat Groups page](#).

Biting incidents

Bat handlers should ascertain whether anyone who brings bats in to them has been bitten or scratched by the bat and, if so, should advise the bitten person to seek advice from their GP immediately irrespective of species (see flow diagram B).

The relevant Government Agency should also be informed (see the tables with contact details for "[Animal health issues](#)" on page 7 and "[Public health issues](#)" on page 8). Since April 2019, the National Bat Helpline no longer coordinates contact with the Government Agencies.

Bats with suspected rabies

If a bat handler suspects that a bat has rabies APHA or other relevant agency (depending on where you are in the UK) must be informed directly (see the table with contact information for [“Animal health issues” on page 7](#)).

APHA will arrange for a veterinary inquiry to take place which will decide whether the bat should be euthanized.

Any bat suspected of having rabies should be kept in a separate room to any other bats in care and away from pets. Separate gloves and equipment should be used for that individual. For further information about disease risk management see the “Supplement to Good Practice Guidelines for Bat Rehabilitators: Managing Disease Risk” available from the BCT website on the [Resources for Bat Groups page](#).

If a decision is made to euthanize the bat, APHA will arrange for urgent transportation of the dead bat to the APHA laboratory (this will also be the case if a suspect bat has died in care prior to contact with APHA). Where a bat tests positive for an EBLV, all records relating to that bat (such as when it was brought into care, where from, who has been in contact with it, etc.) will need to be provided to APHA for follow-up.

N.B. Before symptoms are displayed an infected bat can behave normally but MAY STILL SHED THE VIRUS. As the disease becomes more advanced the bat may become very agitated and overtly aggressive, or alternatively very quiet. We only have limited examples of behaviour from a small number of positive cases from bats in care. In some cases the bats exhibited aggressive agitation or incoordination. At the later stages bats have been observed roosting in the open and not eating or grooming; another bat did eat and drink as normal until it was too weak to approach the feeding bowl, but it too stopped grooming and looked dishevelled. Further information is available in the “Supplement to Good Practice Guidelines for Bat Rehabilitators: Managing Disease Risk” available from the BCT website on the [Resources for Bat Groups page](#).

In summary, if any bat is suspected of having rabies it must be **contained** securely, **isolated** from other bats and APHA (or relevant Government Agency for your part of the UK) **contacted** directly (see the table with contact information for [“Animal health issues” on page 7](#)).

Other dead bats

All other dead bats (i.e. those not suspected of having rabies), of any species, should be sent to APHA as part of the ongoing passive surveillance programme; tubes and postage paid envelopes for sending dead bats are available from the National Bat Helpline on request ([complete the online form](#), email enquiries@bats.org.uk, or call 0345 1300 228). If a bat bite incident did take place before the bat died then this must be indicated on the BAT1 form that should be sent with all dead bats and notifications according to paragraph 10 must be made.

Vagrant bats

Any vagrant bat, which is thought to have arrived in the UK with assistance (for example if it has been found in a shipment of goods) should be formally reported. The bat worker should inform APHA or other relevant Government Agency (depending on where you are in the UK). See the table with contact information for [“Animal health issues” on page 7](#).

If you have any questions over procedures, please contact the BCT Helpline on
0345 1300 228

Section 1

Overall principles when taking a call about a grounded bat

1. You must at some point in the conversation find out whether anyone has been bitten or scratched by the bat, or come into such close contact that saliva may have got on to a person's mucous membranes or into a cut. **Whenever possible, bats should only be handled when there is no alternative.** A suitable speech may run as follows:

"If you do need to handle the bat we recommend that, as with any wild animal, you wear protective gloves so that you are not bitten or scratched. A tiny number of bats in the UK have been found to carry bat rabies, and as a responsible organisation we don't wish anyone to put themselves at risk."

If they have been bitten, you should follow the flow chart for Procedure B. This includes getting the caller to contact the relevant Government Agency, see 'Animal health issues' table below.

2. With all calls you answer, you have discretion about the best way to deal with the situation and for dealing with each caller. For example, in situations where it is obvious to you that the "box method" (see Section 2) of picking up a bat is not feasible, you have the discretion to advise the caller to pick up the bat using protective gloves.
3. You must record fully all bat cases that you deal with. This is invaluable for the collection of data on the scale of demand for such services, and for reference in case the caller needs to be traced.
4. In cases where you feel that the call requires more detailed knowledge than you have, you may contact the relevant Government Agency. In all cases where anyone has been bitten or scratched by the bat, or come into such close contact that saliva may have got on to a person's mucous membranes or into a cut you must ask the caller to report the incident to the relevant Animal Health Agency.

Animal health issues

England	Call Defra Rural Services Helpline on 03000 200 301 and follow the phone menu options to be put through to APHA.
Scotland	In Scotland, find contact details for the relevant local APHA Field Office at: https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/animal-and-plant-health-agency/about/access-and-opening#scotland-field-service-offices

Wales Contact APHA in Wales on 0300 303 8268 and follow the phone menu options.

Northern Ireland Contact Damian McFerran or Michael McCourt at the Ulster Museum 028 9039 5264; or Declan Looney Department of Environment (Northern Ireland) 028 905 69602 / Declan.Looney@doeni.gov.uk
Please contact Damian or Michael first of all.

Public health issues

Further advice can be sought from the following:

Scotland Health Protection Scotland does not wish to be contacted regarding bat bite cases. In Scotland any public health questions should be forwarded to your local medical professional.

England Public Health England
For local inquiries/incidences please contact the local Public Health England team. These details can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/contacts-phe-regions-and-local-centres>

Wales Public Health Wales
For local inquiries/incidences please contact the relevant local Health Protection Team. These details can be found at: <http://www.wales.nhs.uk/sites3/page.cfm?orgid=457&pid=25689>

Northern Ireland Public Health Agency
0300 555 0114
Out of office hours, this number will direct you to the duty doctor
<http://www.publichealth.hscni.net/contact-us>

Initial bat care principles

1. Containing a bat

When it is necessary to contain a bat on welfare grounds, wear gloves and handle the bat as little as possible. Place the bat into a box with a secure lid (such as a shoe box or ice cream tub) with air holes punctured into the lid. Use the spider technique, i.e. place the box over the top and sliding a piece of card underneath, or alternatively, carefully gather the bat into a cloth/tea-towel/gloves are the most effective ways of containment.

2. Initial care

To make the bat feel comfortable, place a loosely clean piece of cloth into the corner of the container. Provide water by placing a few drops into a small shallow dish (such as a water bottle cap or milk bottle lid) and check on the water levels every few hours. Place the box into an isolated room, in a dark area and at room temperature.

3. Professional aid available

Any bat found that has not been seen flying should be passed to a local bat carer. The National Bat Helpline (0345 1300 228) can provide details of local volunteer bat carers. If no contacts are able to assist, take the bat to a nearby vets (veterinary practices have a duty of care for wildlife across the UK) for an initial check over. The BCT helpline can provide support and guidance to veterinary practices.

4. Releasing a bat

Only release bats that have been seen flying recently and strongly. At dusk, take the box outside and place it on an open surface – around 1-2 metres in height such as a wall or car bonnet. Take out the water and tilt the box on its side, removing the lid so the bat can crawl into the open and fly away when it's ready. Stay with the box and watch for any movement. If the bat has not flown off after 15-20 minutes, or has attempted to fly but falls to the ground, re-contain it and take it back inside. The bat should then be passed to a local bat carer or vet as available.

Bats known to have been attacked by a cat, dog or other animal must not be released even when sustained flight is seen. Internal injuries or infection can take several days to show signs and therefore the bat should be passed to a local bat carer or vet for further assessment. The National Bat Helpline (0345 1300 228) can provide details of local volunteer bat carers.

5. Time and weather

Differentiate between finding the bat during the day and finding it at night. If found at night the bat can be released. If found during the day, wait until dusk otherwise the bat will be more vulnerable to predators. If on the evening of the bat's release there is strong wind, heavy rain, or the temperature is cold, do not release the bat and seek additional advice.

6. Pups and juveniles

When a pup (pink/no fur, eyes not open, no bigger than a 50p coin) or juvenile (short velvety grey fur) is established the urgency is increased. Contain the bat as above and seek further advice immediately. In some cases it may be possible for the pup to be reunited with its mother. The National Bat Helpline (0345 1300 228) can provide details of local volunteer bat carers.

Section 2

Scenarios

1. **Someone has been bitten by a bat.** Follow flow chart **Procedure B**.
2. **Someone thinks they have found a rabid bat.** Follow **Procedure A** and then call the relevant Government Agency ([see “Animal Health Issues” table on page 7](#)). Rabies is a legally notifiable disease, so this must be done without delay.
3. **If someone has found a dead bat** - see **Procedure B** from **box B5**. Advise them to wear protective gloves when handling the bat, as there is always a slight risk that the bat was rabid.
4. **Bat in shipment of goods from overseas**
These are commonly called ‘illegal landings’. Give advice on how to contain the bat safely (wearing protective gloves) and ascertain during the conversation whether the bat has bitten or scratched anyone. If it has, follow **Procedure B**. Make enquiries about the location of the incident and where the shipment has come from in order that an assessment can be made of the provenance of the bat. Take the contact details of the caller.

Ask the caller to contact the relevant Government Agency ([see “Animal Health Issues” table on page 7](#)) to report the potential quarantine. Give the caller contact details of the vaccinated bat carer nearest to the facility where the bat will be held so the bat can be identified, and advice given on its immediate housing and care. The bat should not be removed from the site of discovery without confirmation from APHA (or relevant Government Agency).
5. **Vagrant species found grounded**
If it can be ascertained that a vagrant species has arrived by its own means (e.g. flown from Europe) and not as an illegal landing (e.g. in a shipment of goods) it should be treated as a normal grounded bat call. Follow **Procedure A**.

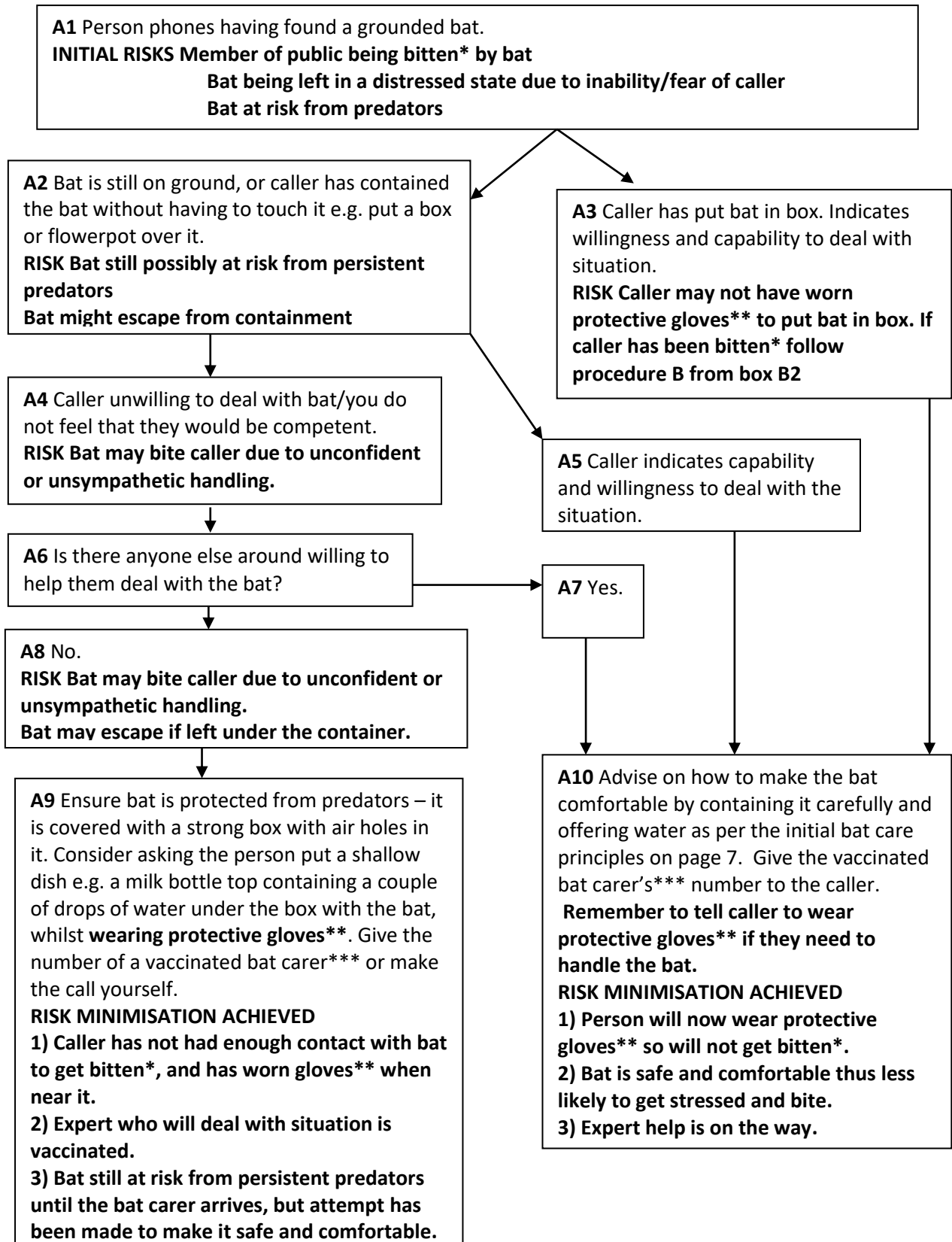
Section 3

Procedures

The Procedures on the following pages are shown in flow chart format.

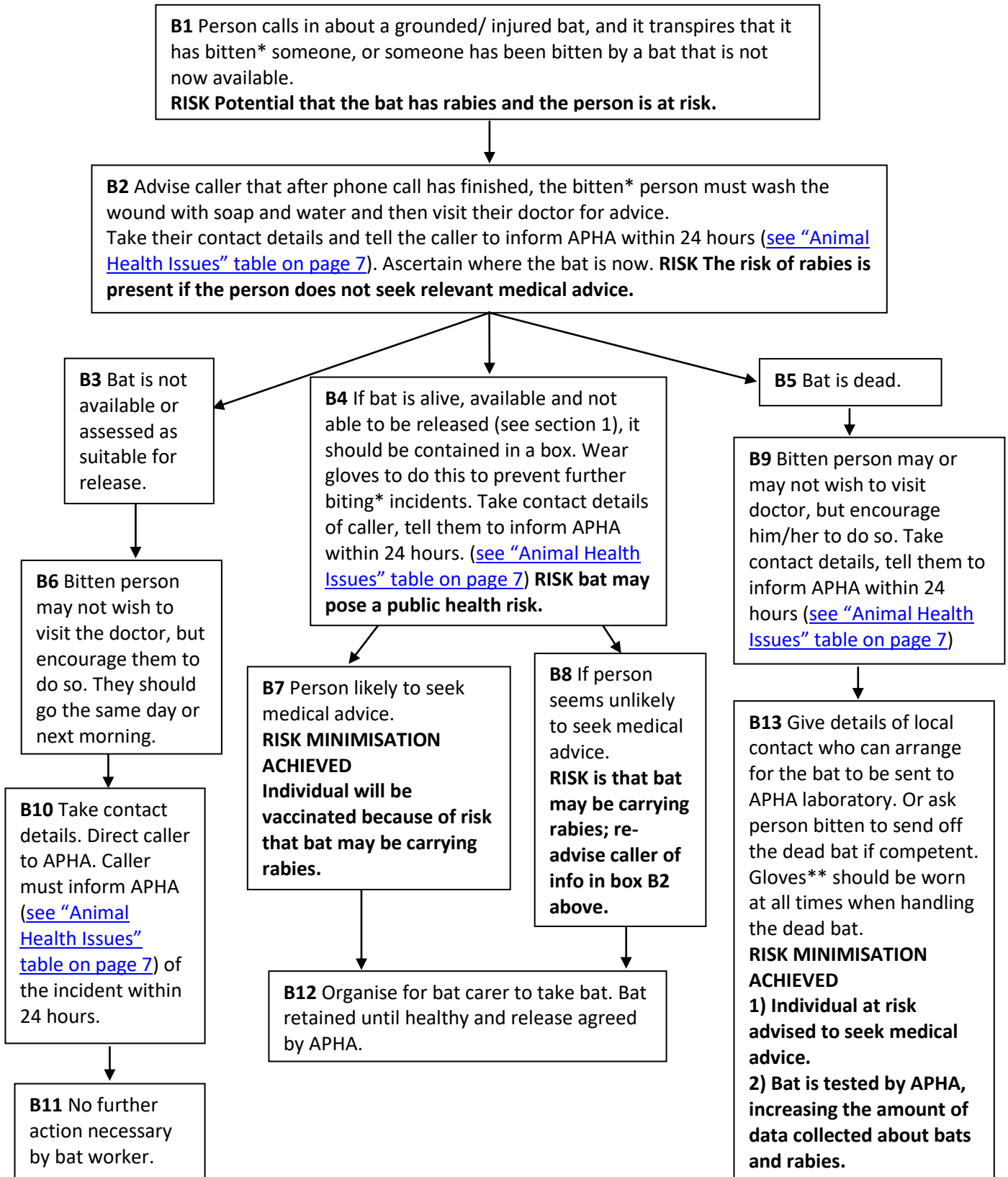
Procedure A

Decisions about grounded and injured bats



Based on original document written by the Bat Conservation Trust under contract for Scottish Natural Heritage

Procedure B When someone has been bitten* by a bat



Based on original document written by the Bat Conservation Trust under contract for Scottish Natural Heritage