



27th March 2021 North of England Bat Conference Online

Priorities in the North of England

This conference was the first to pilot a two-workshop approach, which replaced the previous priorities discussion session. Instead, people had the opportunity to submit priorities at the time of booking and during the conference via the Event App and email.

We have followed-up on the issues raised by delegates with BCT colleagues and external organisations as appropriate, and this document is shared with all delegates.

Priority points raised included:

- Bats and diseases
- Survey Guidance
- Habitat protection
- Training
- Bat recording
- Licensing
- Roofing materials

Bats and diseases

Priority raised: *The top priority at present has to be the likelihood of transmission of SARS-CoV-2 to UK/European bats, and the impact on bats. What actual research into this has been done, recent papers seem to be literature based. We need to understand the impact of bats being handled by humans as well as surveys carried out in restricted/confined spaces and whether using PPE is required or not. So bat groups and carers can be fully informed and either re-start their normal work or not, based on the actual scientific findings.*

Response from BCT's Head of Conservation Services, Lisa Worledge: The IUCN Species Survival Commission Bat Specialist Group (BSG) convened a global panel of experts last year that has continued to meet regularly ever since. The expertise of this group ranges from bat ecologists to virologists, and they have assessed the scientific evidence for human-to-bat transmission and efficacy of risk mitigation strategies. The IUCN BSG has confirmed that "It is the opinion of the panel that there is a credible risk of human-to-bat transmission of SARS-CoV-2, but this risk can be reduced using appropriate mitigation strategies". This statement by the IUCN BSG has not changed, although the group reviews new scientific findings and has recently update guidance for bat rehabilitators and field workers (these documents can be found at: <https://www.iucnbsg.org/bsg-publications.html>), the basic guidance around how to mitigate this risk has not changed.

To date, there have been two lab based studies of bats, one of which has shown that Egyptian fruit bats (*Rousettus aegyptiacus*) can be infected by SARS-CoV-2 (see [Schlottau et al. 2020](#)) whilst the other has shown that big brown bats (*Eptesicus fuscus*) cannot (see [Hall](#)

[et al. 2020](#)). From various reports and papers, we know that sarbecoviruses (the subgenera of betacoronaviruses that includes SARS-CoV and SARS-CoV-2) are found in horseshoe bat species across Eurasia (including a recent finding in the UK, see: <https://www.uea.ac.uk/news/-/article/novel-coronavirus-discovered-in-british-bats>).

In any work that involves handling bats or being in close proximity to them, you should take precautions just as you would for other disease transmission, wear gloves, keep handling to a minimum, and practice good hygiene etc., along with additional precautions specific to this disease, including wearing a face covering, to minimise any risk there might be. Given it is likely that SARS-CoV-2 will become endemic in humans then these precautions, including mask wearing, should be part of ongoing disease risk management (for human and bat health).

We are in the process of updating our guidance in line with the work at the IUCN BSG, so please keep an eye out for any news via the Bat Group Bulletin <https://www.bats.org.uk/resources/resources-for-bat-groups/bat-group-bulletin> and BCT news page <https://www.bats.org.uk/news>

Survey Guidance

Priority raised: *New survey guidance should be relatively high on the priority list. Guidance on survey using IR cameras is eagerly anticipated. We need to discuss survey verses mitigation too. As far as tree roosts are concerned, it is believed that there is now ample evidence that PRFs [potential roost features] are more likely to be unoccupied than they are to be occupied, even when they are an important feature. If trees with PRFs are being felled there should be encouragement to mitigate the loss of the potential roost (and to be honest the loss of the tree as a foraging resource) rather than survey it (although a pre-works check should obviously be required) with further measures required to prevent killing or injury if bats are present.*

Response from BCT's Head of Biodiversity, Jan Collins and BCT's Woodland officer, Sonia Reveley: We are aware that new survey guidance is a high priority and also guidance on surveying with IR cameras. We will be working on the new survey guidelines this year and are working with a partner to produce guidelines for using IR cameras for bat surveys. Due to tree and woodland surveys being a complicated issue we devoted this year's UK Bat Steering Group meeting (June) to discussing this, with a second meeting to discuss mitigation/compensation for impacts on tree roosts (July). We are drawing conclusions on appropriate approaches following these meetings. We agree that if work on trees with PRFs cannot be avoided we should encourage mitigating for the loss of the potential roost, but this shouldn't be instead of surveying.

Habitat protection

Priority raised: *Retaining/conserving important habitats for foraging and commuting.*

Priority raised: *Strategies for protecting foraging areas from development.*

Response from BCT's Director of Conservation, Carol Williams: Unlike roosts, bat foraging areas are not legally protected, but these habitats are vital for bats. With regards to threats

from development, if a bat survey demonstrates that development is likely to affect bat foraging and/or commuting habitat, then linear features such as tree lines should be retained, and compensatory planting should be considered wherever possible. With Biodiversity Net Gain in England (BNG; part of the Environment Bill) the importance of foraging habitat within the core sustenance zone from a roost should increase the profile of the importance of retaining this, or if elements are lost ensuring this is addressed within that core sustenance zone. This is by no means a straightforward scenario as species are not part of the metric used for calculating BNG, but that doesn't mean species considerations are not a part of the necessary process but just deemed too complex to be in the metric. To try and bridge this potential gap BCT, with colleagues from WSP, Balfour Beatty and Atkins have produced this [guidance document](#). We are currently working on a survey for ecologists to see how well this has been applied.

In addition to our work with the planning and development sector, work on conservation of foraging and commuting areas by BCT is generally delivered through guidance and training to the major land management sectors whose work has the potential to affect bats, such as woodland forestry management through our Woodland Officer and agriculture through our land management projects. We also have a wide-reaching effect through partnerships such as [Back from the Brink](#) which delivers for a range of taxon groups in a range of habitats. For example, the grey long-eared bat project has created multiple countryside stewardship agreements from landowners in Devon with a focus for its need for unimproved grassland. We have reached even more landowners outside to stewardship agreements who have changed the way they farm to protect the future foraging needs of the grey long-eared bat. This work has been extended by a new project that reaches from Devon across into Dorset (more can be read about the future of this project in the spring 2021 edition of Bat News). Different types of foraging area, such as woodland, agricultural land and urban areas, are subject to different threats and require different approaches. Please follow the links on this webpage to explore more about our work in these areas: <https://www.bats.org.uk/our-work/landscapes-for-bats>.

Research to guide future management practices and prescriptions for habitat management are essential. BCT has identified a set of priority research areas where further evidence is needed to help inform and direct bat conservation. For example, one priority area is woodland use and management with the questions, "How are bats affected by common woodland management techniques?" and "What are the fine-scale habitat associations of woodland bats?". Please see the full research priority document [here](#). Work on these research areas will help to ensure BCT guidance, including in relation to bat foraging habitats, is based on the latest evidence.

Training

Priority raised: *Training and sharing experience of using latest technologies including using the EM2 /EM2 professional and related software.*

Response from BCT's Training and Conferences Manager Naomi Webster: The analysis software for EM2/EM2 Pro is Wildlife Acoustics Kaleidoscope. We regularly offer training on

this as an online or in person course (when able) mostly recently on 30th April, for more details click [here](#). Wildlife Acoustics also offer free [online training](#) themselves and may have more feedback to share on the Echo Meter Touch 2's use in the field.

Bat Group Recording

***Priority raised:** Supporting regional bat groups in the systematic mapping of local bat populations.*

Response from BCT's Bat Groups Officer, Abby Packham: Contacting other bat groups, either directly or through myself, which have produced maps of the kind your group hope to create would be a good source of practical information on how to carry out such a project and what technology they used. BCT has hosted two '[Bat Group Mingle](#)' events to facilitate bat groups coming together to share and seek advice on projects and group organisation, such as Bat Atlas projects. iRecord could also prove a useful tool in this endeavor, with the added benefit of adding the records to the National Biodiversity Network for you. BCT is looking to explore the functionality of the software in the near future.

***Priority raised:** Innovative promotion in order to increase members/volunteer bat recorders.*

Response from BCT's Bat Groups Officer Abby Packham: This is something a number of bat groups are keen to focus on, so sharing ideas between groups could be advantageous. Other possible strategies include forming a stronger partnership with the National Bat Monitoring Programme (NBMP), by having an NBMP Champion for the group, which could help increase volunteer bat recorders and possibly membership from the overlap of those that conduct surveys for the NBMP but aren't part of the bat group yet. There is a document in the '[resources for bat groups](#)' section of our website with ideas for [increasing membership](#) as well. Given the past year, being virtually accessible has become increasingly important, whether that be through an online social media presence or virtual events. This new way of working has sparked some innovative solutions and made bat activities more accessible to a wider audience. BCT is always happy to support groups through the sharing of promotional material and events, via our own channels (such as the website, bat group bulletin, social media, etc.) as appropriate.

Licensing

***Priority raised:** More support for regional training for bat group members rather than professionals in respect of licensing.*

Response from BCT's Bat Groups Officer Abby Packham: We regularly run introductory workshops on Natural England licensing, including details on how to work towards each of the licences. Two such workshops were run at the English regional conferences this year: "Introduction to Natural England Class Licensing" and "Introduction to Project Licensing". These are aimed at bat group members rather than professional ecologists (although of relevance to the latter as well). It is important to note that the survey class licences do not differentiate between professional and volunteer survey activities (except at the more advanced levels that include mist netting and harp trapping). The only licence specifically for

volunteers is the Volunteer Bat Roost Visitor class licence, which is dedicated to the Natural England Bat Advice Service and cannot be used for other activities. Both licensing workshops can be run directly for bat groups, in lieu of the annual Partner Group meeting with BCT for example. If a bat group has further specific questions regarding their situation or would like to book a workshop on licensing, then please get in touch via batgroups@bats.org.uk. More information and useful links for Natural England licensing can be found on the [Resources for Bat Groups](#) pages of the BCT website.

Priority raised: *Natural England's current focus on District Licensing and its potential impacts for bats.*

Response from BCT's Director of Conservation, Carol Williams: We have long been aware of and fighting this challenge. We have had successes such as the Red Tape Initiative confirming in its report that a district licensing approach is not suitable for bats, but the threat has not entirely receded. We carry on challenging both NE and Defra wherever this subject is raised. The addition of the Species Conservation Strategies as an amendment to the Environment Bill was initially perceived as a cover for district licensing by another name. By working with fellow NGOs we have made a strong push back on this and a suggested amendment to that amendment has now been tabled with a framework that focuses Species Conservation Strategies on identifying conservation need and negative drivers and how they need to be targeted to address them and by whom. In this way they can truly become strategies to conserve the species. BCT are constantly on our guard for any such challenges and fear that, with the Environment Bill amendment recently tabled that aims to give the Secretary of State powers to amend the Habitat Regulations, there will be more battles to fight. We will likely be reaching out to all bat workers to support us in this in the coming weeks and months.

Built Environment

Priority raised: *Could BCT help with the development and/or testing of modern alternatives to Type 1F felt? I think that would have potential to result in a large conservation gain (and it would make life much easier!)*

Response from BCT's Built Environment Manager Jo Ferguson: The Non-Bitumen Coated Roofing Membrane steering group that was formed in May 2019 saw BCT working alongside the SNCO's and academic materials experts to help create an independent testing methodology paper to be used to test for the snagging propensity of NBCRMs in buildings by bats. The paper was published in an industry journal in May 2020, it is pay-for-view as it is a technical paper designed to be used by manufacturers however you can click [here](#) to read the background to this work and for the latest updates. Since the paper has been published, the steering group have helped publicise the methodology to manufactures through articles in the industry magazine 'Roofing Today'. BCT are also helping to arrange testing for snagging propensity of manufacturers membranes through steering group member Leeds University.