

# 2018

## Out of Hours Report



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Grace Johnson

Out of Hours Project Co-ordinator

[www.bats.org.uk](http://www.bats.org.uk)

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# 1. Overview

The National Bat Helpline is run by the Bat Conservation Trust (BCT) and receives over 12,000 enquiries during office hours each year. A large proportion of these enquiries (49% in 2017) relate to bats in need of assistance (grounded, injured, etc.).

The Helpline operates from 9.30am until 4.30pm Monday to Friday, excluding bank holidays. However, bats can be found at any time of day and during the months of May to September when bats are most active, the Helpline experiences its highest call numbers, as demonstrated in figure 1 below.

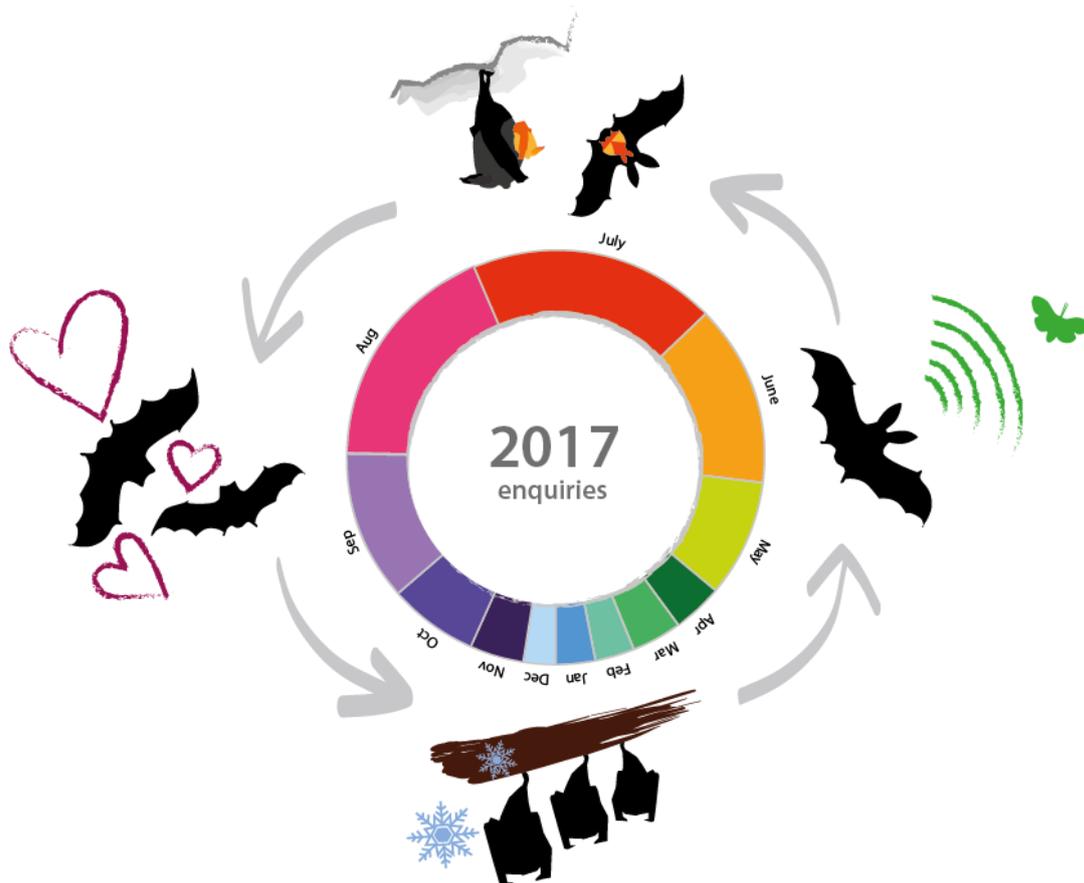


Figure 1: The proportion of enquiries received on the Helpline across the year in 2017. January - March accounts for 10.2%, April - June 27.3%, July - September 49.2% and October - December 13.3%.

To ensure that emergency advice is available when the Helpline is closed, an Out of Hours (OOH) Helpline operates during these peak months of May to September. This OOH service is manned by trained volunteers who advise members of the public when bats need rescuing and regarding bat crimes.

In 2018, 48 volunteers participated in the OOH service, answering emergency calls from their homes during evenings, weekends and bank holidays between 26 May and 30 September. Due to changes in funding, the 2018 OOH season did not commence until 26 May, where in previous years it has begun on 1 May. Comprehensive training and ongoing support was provided for volunteers, with a member of the Helpline as back-up staff allocated to each voluntary shift for additional support and to take over particular cases. For the majority of the season, two volunteers covered the Helpline at a time to help manage the increased call volume.

Weekday shifts or 'bat watches' ran from 5.30pm to 10.30pm, with weekend and bank holiday days split into three bat watches as per the below tables.

| Volunteers:                |  |
|----------------------------|--|
| Weekdays                   | 5.30 - 10.30pm   |
| Weekends and bank holidays | 1) 9am - 1.30pm<br>2) 1.30pm - 6pm<br>3) 6pm - 10.30pm |

| Back up Staff:             |                                  |
|----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Weekdays                   | 5.30 - 10.30pm                   |
| Weekends and bank holidays | 1) 9am - 4pm<br>2) 4pm - 10.30pm |

Due to staffing changes during the summer, Hannah Van Hesteren began the season as OOH Project Coordinator, with Grace Johnson as Project Assistant. In August, Grace Johnson took over as Project Coordinator. This was communicated to volunteers however, did not result in too many changes thanks to the introduction of the shared OOH email inbox, which can be reached via [outofhours@bats.org.uk](mailto:outofhours@bats.org.uk).

Overall in 2018, 345 out of a possible 413 bat watches were covered by volunteers, totalling an incredible 1937 hours donated, including training, which has an equivalent monetary value of over £27,226<sup>1</sup>. There were only three occasions all season where OOH had no volunteer cover at all.

<sup>1</sup> Equivalent to London Living Wage (£10.20)/hr plus Employers National Insurance (13.8%), current pension contributions (4%) and approximate overheads at 20%.

## 2. Recruitment

This year's OOH volunteering opportunity was advertised through the BCT website, various BCT email bulletins, environmental job sites which advertise voluntary positions and via social media. A poster developed for the project in 2017 was sent to a number of universities for sharing with students via emails and notice boards. Several previous and newly recruited volunteers also shared the adverts with their local network.



[environmentjob.co.uk](http://environmentjob.co.uk)

Out of the 83 people who expressed an interest in volunteering, 60 signed up to participate in the OOH season. Some of those registered were unfortunately not able to attend the training days, which left us with 48 trained volunteers to begin the season with. One volunteer decided not to go ahead with OOH volunteering, and then two volunteers unfortunately decided not to continue with OOH due to health issues. Volunteers began on OOH from 26 May.

### 3. Training

Training days were held by the then OOH Project Coordinator (Hannah Van Hesteren) and OOH Project Assistant (Grace Johnson) in York and London. Each day ran from 10.30am until 4.30pm, with lunch provided and volunteer travel costs covered by BCT up to the value of £100. On arrival at the training, volunteers received a detailed OOH Volunteer Manual to take home with them, and access to an online volunteers area which houses further training and resources.

Training days were informal and discussion was encouraged. The day included a presentation as well as interactive learning tools. Time was scheduled for exercises which allowed volunteers to try out the technology and role plays to practice what had been learned in a supportive environment.

The following topics were covered:

- An introduction to BCT and the OOH project
- The OOH volunteer role and responsibilities
- How 'Bat watches' work
- Type of calls and how to deal with them
- Bat care & rabies advice
- Bat Crime
- Non-emergency calls
- An introduction to the technology (electronic forms and integrated maps)

At the end of the day, volunteers were asked to sign the volunteer agreement, return any expenses forms and provide feedback. Excerpts of our excellent training feedback can be found below;

"Both tutors explained everything really clearly and made us feel very welcome. Thank you for a great experience!"

"Very well presented and explained in a simple way, so easy to understand."

"It was fun and informative and everything seems clear."

"The way the information was presented is great: concise to the point but with enough detail."

"Really informative but fun presentation style - loved it!"

"In a comforting, friendly yet professional manner which covered all areas regardless of knowledge I already had. Hannah and Grace did a great job."

## 4. Phones

A new online system was used to control the times at which incoming calls were diverted to a volunteer's phone, which was changed on a daily basis by Helpline staff. This system diverted calls to a phone of the volunteers' choice and automatically prevented calls from reaching volunteers after 10.30pm. Phone diversions operated as follows:

**Weekdays:** Phones were diverted to the volunteers at 5.30pm and then automatically re-diverted to BCT's After Hours system at 10.30pm. This system gave callers the opportunity to leave voicemails for staff to pick up during office hours or advised that they call again at 9.30am the following morning if it was an emergency.

**Weekends:** Phones were transferred to morning volunteers at 9am and then transferred to the afternoon volunteers at 1.30pm and the evening volunteers at 6pm on Saturdays, Sundays and bank holidays. Again, calls were automatically diverted to BCT's After Hours system at 10.30pm every evening until the phones were diverted to either a morning volunteer or the BCT Helpline (depending on day) at 9am or 9.30am the following day.

Typically on weekdays, back-up staff were able to input the relevant volunteer phone numbers at any point during the working day, ready for the automatic transfer at 5.30pm. On weekends and bank holidays, staff would manipulate the phones remotely via the internet at the exact times these were required.

### Auto-attendants

It is important to filter calls coming through on the Out of Hours Helpline, so volunteers only receive emergency calls relating to injured or grounded bats and bat crimes. Any other calls should be dealt with in office hours by Helpline staff.

With the addition of two Helpline Support Officers to the in-office Helpline team this year, it was possible to filter urgent bat care calls from more general Helpline enquiries. Upon dialling the main Helpline number, option 1 was for callers 'with a bat in need of urgent care or to report a bat crime'. These calls would be transferred through to Helpline staff during office hours, starting with Helpline Support Officers who primarily answered these calls during office hours, and OOH volunteers at other times. Calls would be directed first to Volunteer 1, and then on to Volunteer 2 if the first person was already on a call or taking a break. To allow this system to work, it was requested that volunteers disable their voicemail services on their phones. The audio message for this option also briefly advised how to safely contain a bat, for times when the Helpline was unavailable. Callers were advised to always handle a bat with gloves, and to visit the BCT website for more information. The audio also advised that injured or grounded bats could be taken a local vet or wildlife hospital if callers were unable to reach a volunteer, or if it was at a time when the service was not operating.

Callers pressed option 2 if they had a non-urgent enquiry for the Helpline, and would be transferred to Helpline staff in office hours and to a voicemail system outside of office hours. With the amendment of in-office Helpline call hours to 9.30am - 4.30pm (rather than 9am - 5.30pm previously), an audio message was created explaining when the Helpline was unavailable. The caller was given the option to leave a message which would be dealt with in office hours, and explaining the OOH service and its hours of operation, should they wish to call back.

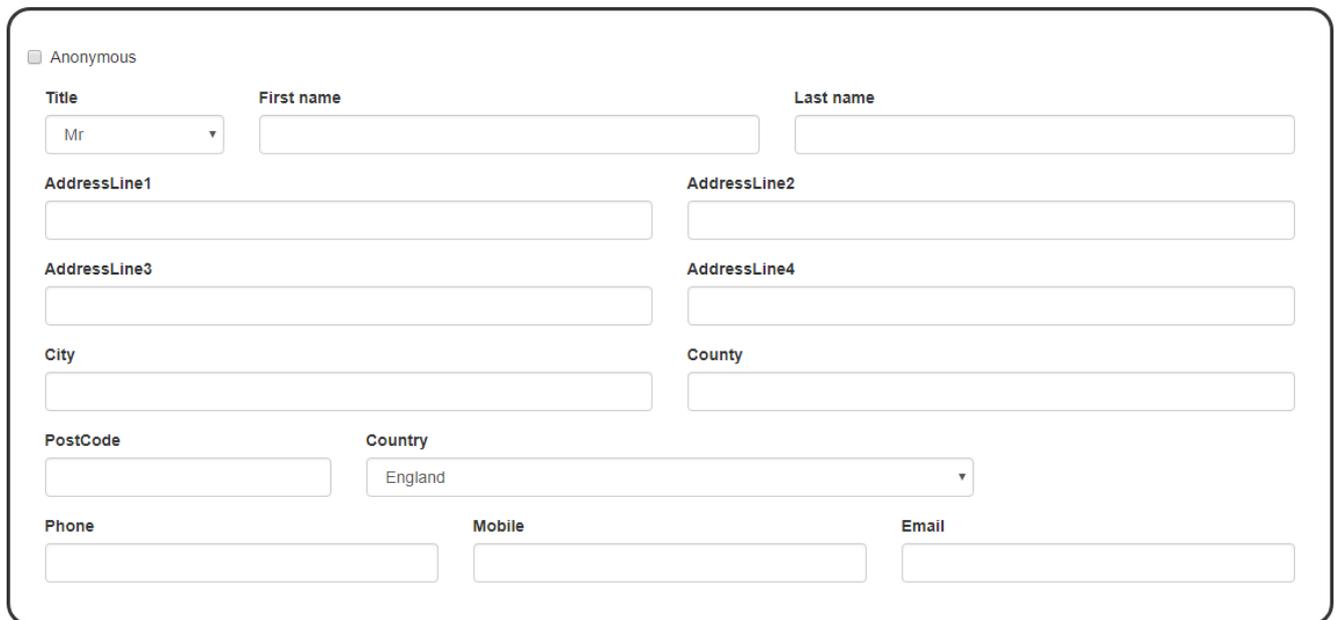
Occasionally it was necessary for volunteers to make outgoing calls during their shifts, for example to bat care contacts or their back-up staff. BCT reimburses any associated charges to OOH volunteers if an itemised bill is submitted.

# 5. Technology

## Online Volunteer Area

Following on from 2017, OOH volunteers were given unique accounts with access to an online volunteers' area, operated through Microsoft Office 365 SharePoint. This housed additional training resources, the rota, a news area, important contact details and most importantly the electronic forms.

As it is vital that accurate records are kept for each call we take on the Helpline, volunteers were encouraged to record call details on an electronic form, part of which is shown in figure 2 below. This detailed form prompted volunteers to record the required information and allowed volunteers to flag any particular follow up that would be required from Helpline staff. Details from electronic forms were then manually imported to the Helpline's main database and checked at 9am every working day.



The form is titled 'Anonymous' with a checkbox. It contains several input fields: 'Title' (dropdown menu with 'Mr' selected), 'First name', and 'Last name'. Below these are four 'AddressLine' fields (AddressLine1, AddressLine2, AddressLine3, AddressLine4). There are also fields for 'City' and 'County'. A 'PostCode' field and a 'Country' dropdown menu (with 'England' selected) are located below the address fields. At the bottom, there are three fields for 'Phone', 'Mobile', and 'Email'.

Figure 2: The first part of the online form volunteers used to record calls.

## Google Maps

In order to access the contact details of relevant bat care contacts, OOH volunteers were given access to an integrated Google Map which hosts the information. This map could be accessed through the online form, once the post code had been inputted. Volunteers were able to compare the location of callers with local contacts and access relevant information about each contact. This map is updated at the end of every working day by Helpline staff.

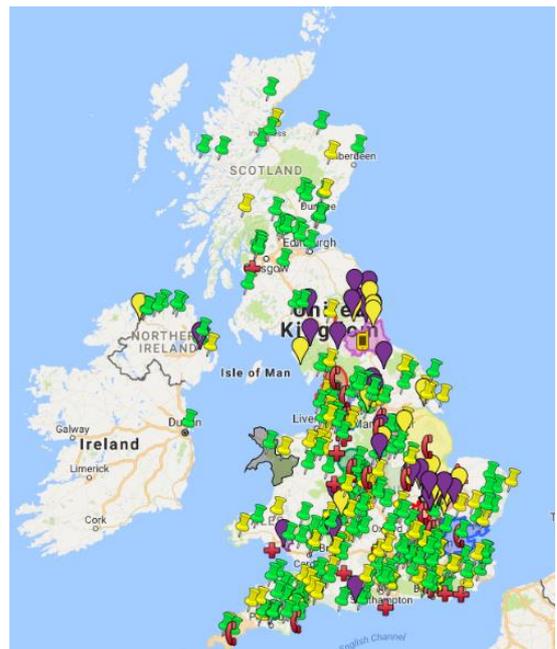


Figure 3: An example of the Bat Care Network Google Map used by volunteers. Each pin represents a different care contact.

## 6. Volunteer shifts and support

BCT appreciate and highly value OOH volunteers and aimed to encourage an environment of support and volunteer empowerment throughout the season. Alongside the training day, volunteers were offered ongoing support and training throughout the season.

Following feedback from volunteers and back up staff in 2017, various changes were made in order to improve the 2018 season. In 2017, weekend shifts for volunteers were split into two slots; 9am-4.30pm and 4.30pm-10.30pm. Feedback indicated that these slots were too long. This year weekend bat watches for volunteers were therefore split into three slots (9am-1.30pm, 1.30pm-6pm, 6pm-10.30pm). Back up staff continue to carry out an AM and PM weekend shift, thus meaning that afternoon volunteers had two back up staff members, one from 1.30pm-4pm and a second from 4pm-6pm, all of which was communicated in advance.

The OOH Project Coordinator and Project Assistant were available for support during office hours throughout the entire season. Each OOH bat watch also had an OOH back-up staff member allocated for support on the day. Volunteers often contacted back-up staff for reassurance, to check advice, for guidance with any technology issues or for any other forms of OOH support that were required.

Volunteers also received regular updates from the OOH Project Coordinator throughout the season which included feedback, reminders, updates to advice and a reminder of shifts. Volunteers were also given the opportunity to sign up to a weekly OOH Newsletter called 'OOH News'. This included fun and interesting OOH related bat care stories, encouragement and thanks from the BCT Staff.

A private Facebook group was created at the start of the 2018 OOH season so that volunteers could connect with each other and share experiences. This also allowed the OOH coordinators to advertise available bat watches and communicate updates. Not all OOH volunteers were members of the Facebook group, so important updates were still communicated by email.

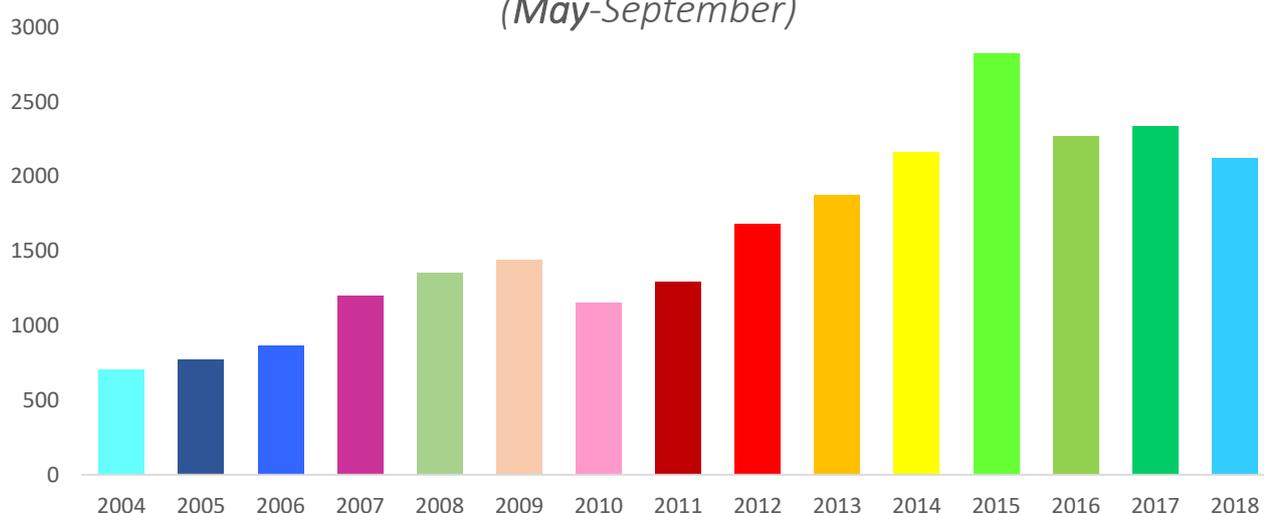
According to feedback, the supportive environment was valued by volunteers and is also evidenced by the 94% volunteer retention throughout the season.

## 7. Calls taken

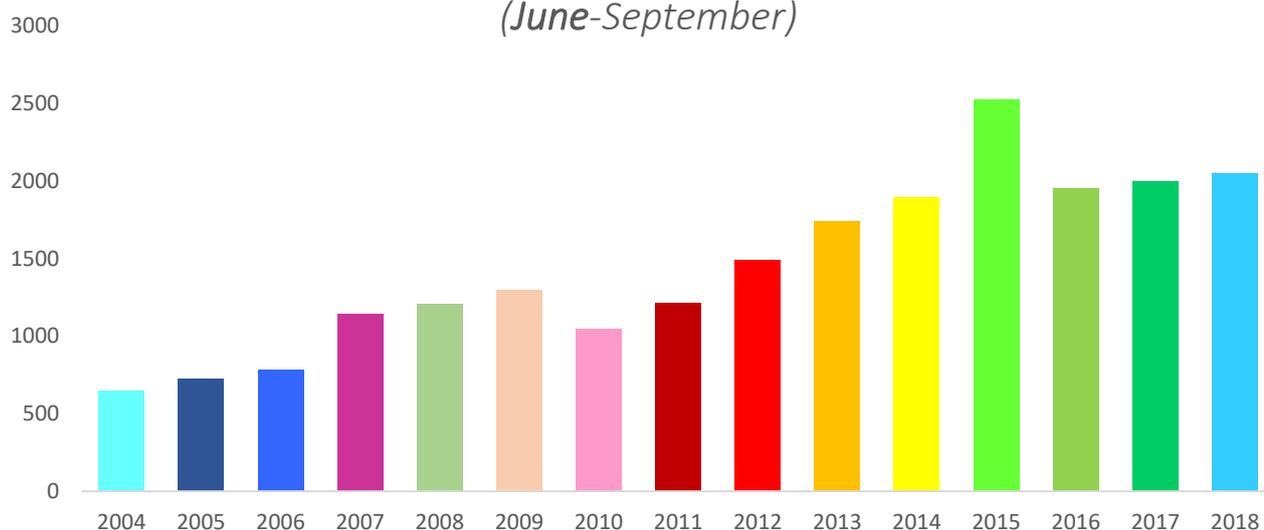
### Total number of calls

Volunteers handled a total of **2,119** calls in 2018. The below graph shows a comparison of total call numbers between different years of the OOH service. In previous years, the OOH service has begun on 1 May however, in 2018 the service began on 26 May. A more accurate comparison between years would therefore be with the removal of the month of May, as per the second graph below.

*Out of Hours calls taken over the years  
(May-September)*



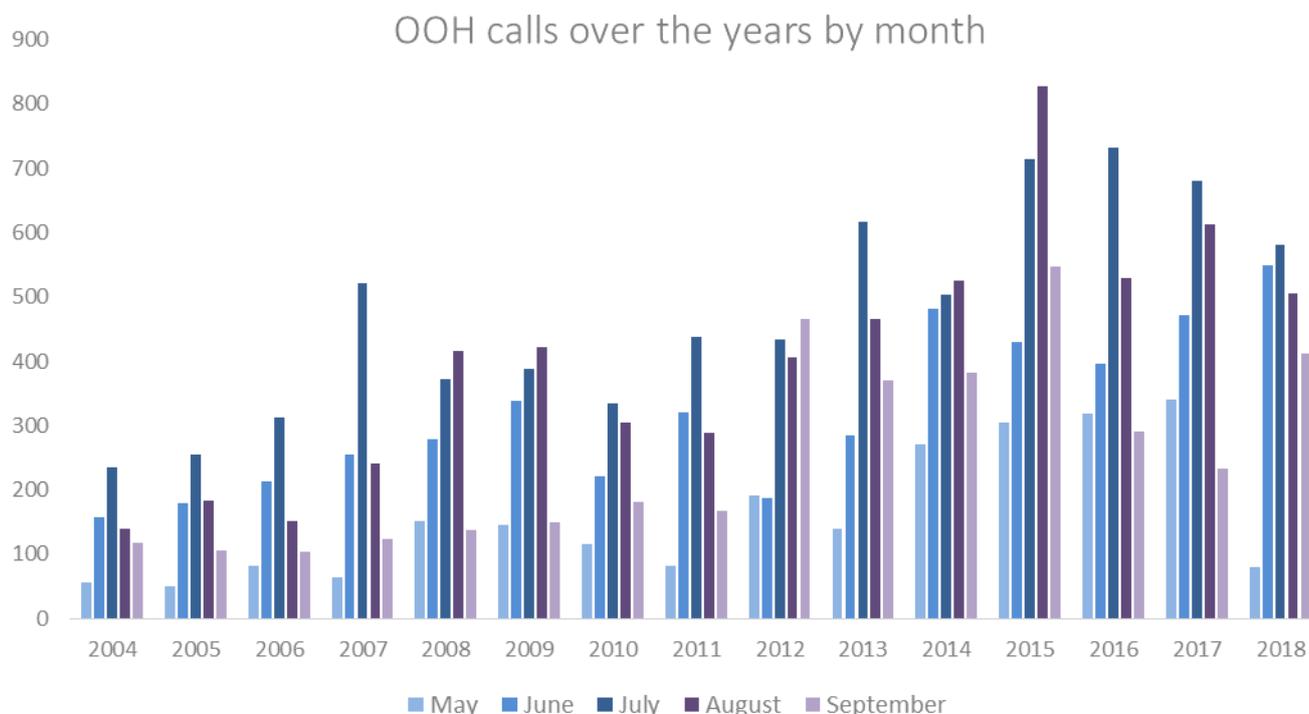
*Out of Hours calls taken over the years  
(June-September)*



This comparison of full months of the service indicates that 2018 was the second busiest OOH season on record, with 2015 remaining the busiest OOH season. This June to September comparison shows that since the busiest year in 2015, high call numbers have remained fairly constant, with 1,948 calls in 2016, 1,996 calls in 2017 and 1,997 calls in 2018.

There appears to have been a general upward trend in call volumes since the beginning of OOH. Perhaps weather, an increased awareness of the OOH service (BCT currently has over 106,000 followers on Facebook and 31,000 on Twitter) and an increased capacity to take calls (with more volunteers recruited every year) has contributed to this rise.

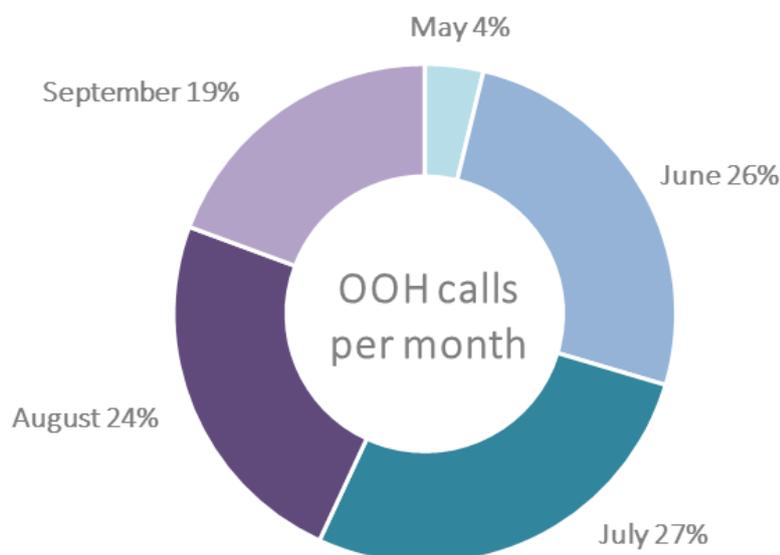
## Calls per month



2018 saw the busiest June in OOH history as seen in the above graph, perhaps due to a very hot summer resulting in an early start to the maternity season. The first documented wild bat pups were Natterer’s bats found in Somerset on 26 May. Conversely, in July we received the lowest number of calls since 2014 but it was still the busiest month of the 2018 OOH service. Busier OOH shifts are anticipated in the middle of the season as this typically coincides with a rise in baby and juvenile bats becoming separated from their roost and requiring rescue.

Call numbers in 2018 were much more consistent from month to month, as seen in the above and below graphs, where in previous years they have varied a lot. After the peak month of July, call numbers gradually dropped through August and September. Average call numbers are usually used to decide when to move from one volunteer per shift to two. In 2018, with the later OOH start date, it was decided that two volunteers per shift from the first weekend would be better for call levels but also to ensure that the volunteers received enough bat watches. This was continued right through until the end of September. This also relieved pressure on staff if one of the volunteers was unable to carry out their bat watch for any reason.

The highest number of calls taken in a bat watch by a volunteer was at the end of June when one volunteer took an incredible 20 calls. The second most calls taken in a bat watch was 19 and also occurred at the end of June.

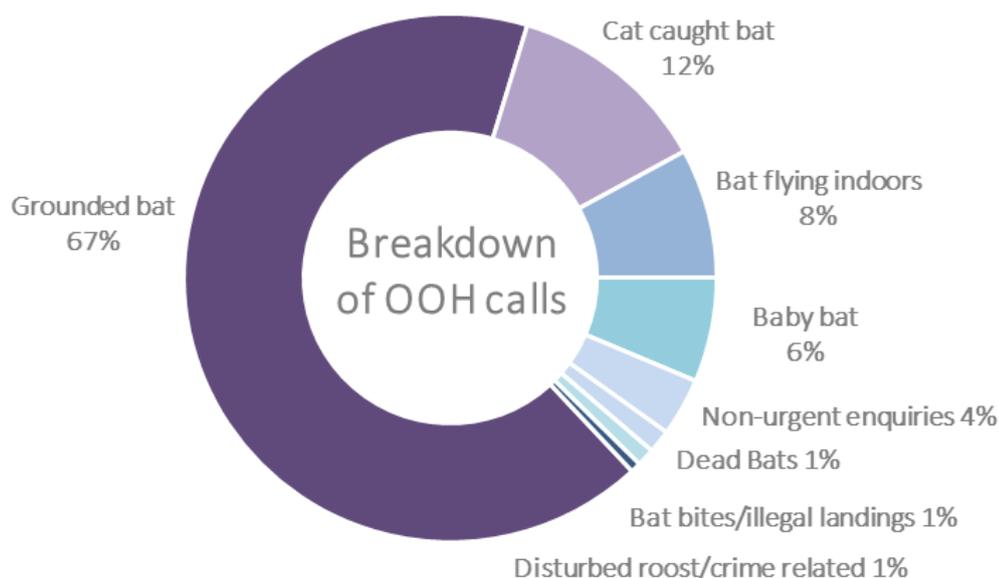


### Subject of calls

The majority of the calls taken are about bats in need of some kind of care or assistance, as seen in the graph below. Grounded bats made up almost 70% of our OOH calls and included injured bats and bats grounded or landed outside, in houses and in other buildings. It is not always possible to tell why bats have been found grounded or landed but it may be the result of exhaustion, dehydration or injury. 12% of OOH calls came from members of the public whose cat had caught a bat. Cats are major predators of bats and can cause long lasting injuries or septicaemia if not quickly rescued. Baby bats, otherwise known as pups, occasionally get lost or abandoned by their mother and cannot survive very long without proper care. Calls about baby bats made up 6% of the OOH calls this year. Healthy bats capable of strong flight can also occasionally find themselves flying indoors, usually if windows or doors have been left open on fine nights or inexperienced juveniles get lost on their maiden flight. Calls about bats flying in buildings made up 8% of calls.

When bats are not behaving the way we'd expect a healthy bat to (flying strongly outside in the dark, or safely tucked away in their roosts), OOH volunteers will assess the best outcome for the bat and advise the caller. Sometimes it is possible to advise that healthy bats are released outdoors, however most often OOH volunteers will advise that the bat is securely contained in a box before putting the caller in touch with a local voluntary care contact from the UK Bat Care Network. If there is no volunteer care contact available, members of the public are advised to take the bat to a local vet.

A small proportion of OOH calls relate to bats that have been accidentally disturbed in their roosts, for example during building work, and reports of potential bat crimes. Helpline staff advised on four potential bat crime cases that were reported during OOH, and nine cases where bats had been accidentally found during work. OOH volunteers are trained on how to handle these calls and more information is available to callers online or when calling back the Helpline in office hours. Similarly, callers with requests for general information, advice about their bat roosts or planning and development for example are advised to call the Helpline back during office hours (reflected in the below chart as non-urgent enquiries).



### European Bat Lyssavirus (EBLV) Advice

One of the first priorities when answering bat care enquiries is to determine if a member of the public has been bitten or scratched by a bat. It is then ensured that the enquirer has contained the bat safely using the 'box method', in doing so preventing direct contact with the bat and reduce the bite risk. This is done on all Helpline calls, both in-office and out of hours. All callers are advised not to handle any bat species with bare hands whether grounded, injured or healthy.

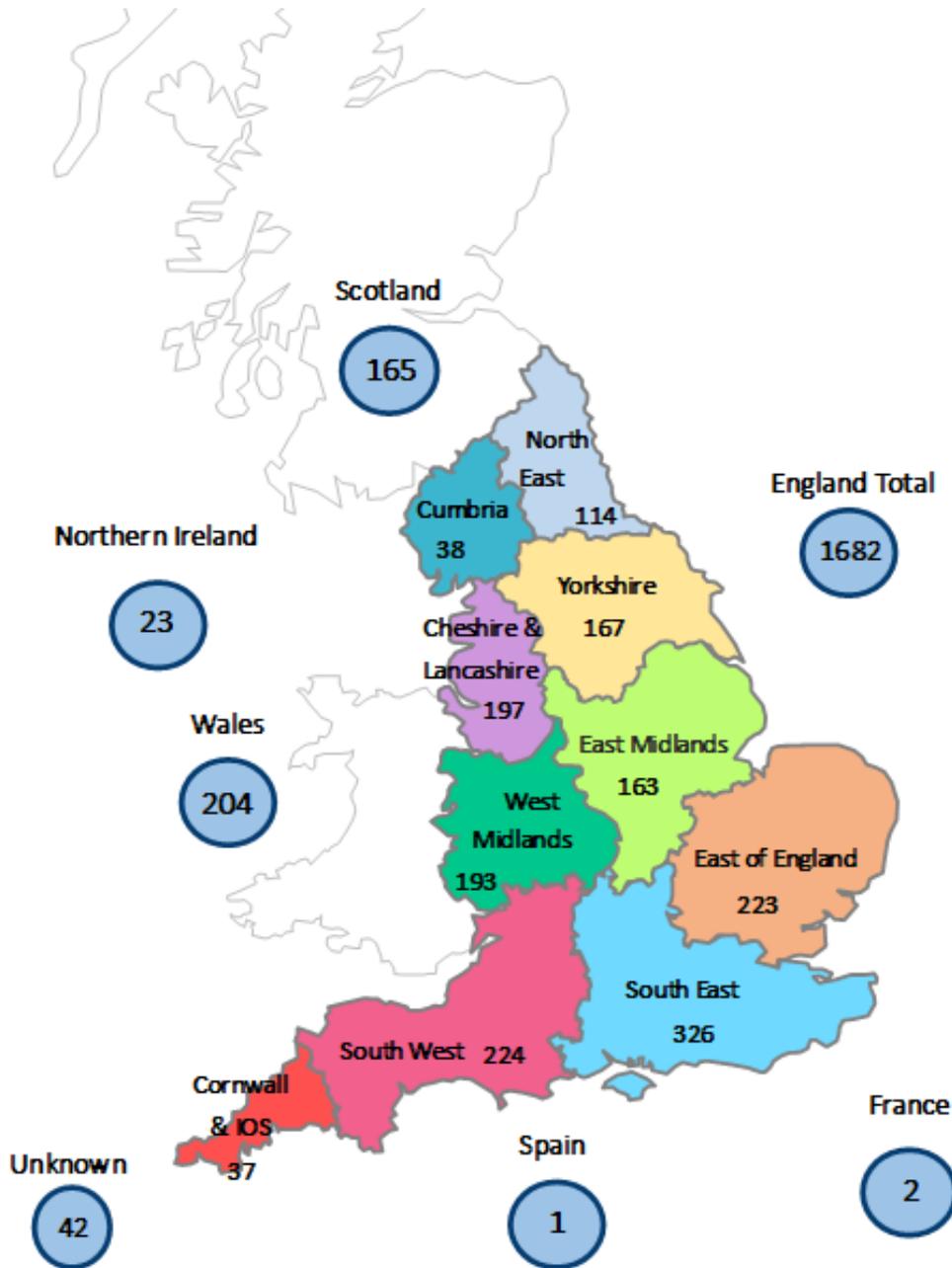
Very rarely, frightened or injured bats may bite or scratch when being handled. In such cases, OOH volunteers give initial advice on containing the bat safely and seeking medical attention, and then the back-up staff take the case over. The back-up staff member will then follow set procedures and re-emphasise the need for the caller to seek medical attention as soon as possible, organise care for the bat, ascertain species where possible, and report the case to the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA). Similarly, OOH volunteers give initial advice if there is a potential for a bat to have come from overseas, and then the case is passed to back up staff to follow set rabies prevention procedures. Although these sorts of cases only made up around 1% of OOH calls, they typically take much longer to deal with than an average bat care call. On average, a bat bite takes an hour to resolve, and an illegal landing can take an average of three hours, though have been as long as six hours this summer with more complex cases.

1% of calls came from those who had found a bat that had died. If the caller is happy to comply, OOH volunteers advise on how to store the bat short term and a rabies testing pack, or 'dead bat pack', is sent to the caller in the post during office hours. This facilitates a passive surveillance scheme carried out by the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) which monitors the prevalence of a very rare type of rabies, European Bat Lyssaviruses (EBLV), in dead bats submitted to the scheme.

### Where the calls came from

As seen on the map below, most of the OOH calls came from England with some calls from other areas of the UK and the occasional call from overseas. As a UK based charity, we are limited in the advice we can give to

international callers, but do try to put the caller in touch with a bat charity or contact based in the country they are calling from where possible.



## 8. Information sent

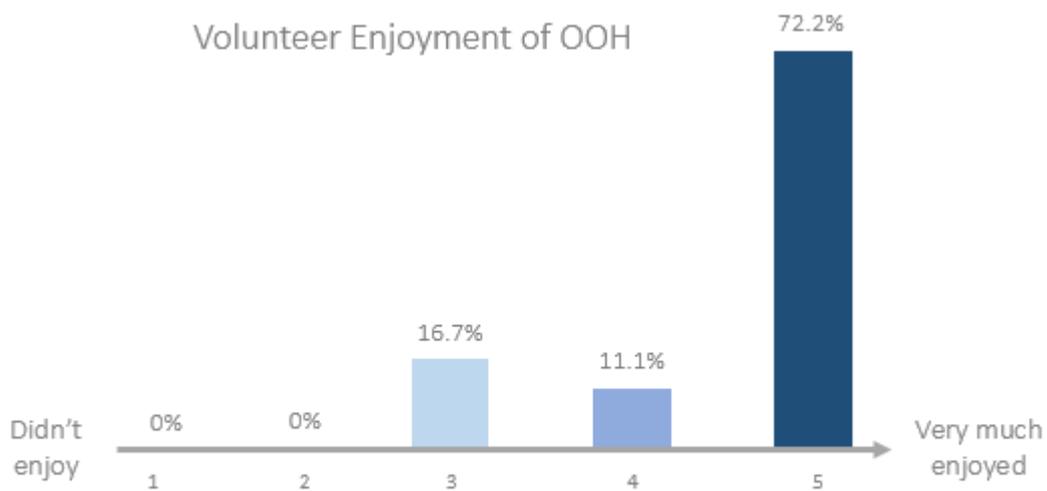
Many callers to the OOH Helpline are interested in receiving further advice, or a 'thank you' from BCT. OOH volunteers include the request for any extra support in their data collection and any resources are sent to callers (by email where possible) during office hours by the Helpline staff. For positive callers, we include information about bat ecology, how to encourage bats and how to get involved with BCT via membership, donation and volunteering. The OOH volunteers inspired a lot of support for BCT as a result of their work and we sent a number of 'positive enquirer packs' to callers who had engaged with the service. One caller reportedly asked how they could volunteer for the OOH service next year.

## 9. Volunteer feedback

Volunteers were invited to provide feedback throughout the season and an open line of communication between the OOH Project Coordinator and volunteers was always present in case any concerns arose. Midway through the season, volunteers were invited to provide any suggestions they had on improvements that could be implemented immediately. This feedback was largely excellent and no major concerns were raised. 94% of volunteers who responded were enjoying the OOH season, and 94% of volunteers who responded felt supported by both the OOH Project Coordinator and back-up staff.

A final opportunity to provide feedback on areas including technology, logistics, training and support was offered to volunteers when the season had finished. This feedback is used to help design the structure of the 2019 season and identify any areas which require improvement. A summary of the main points is below.

### General feedback



- 95% of respondents would consider volunteering for OOH again.
- Reasons given for not enjoying OOH as much as possible included preferring face-to-face volunteering, and sometimes feeling under pressure when on bat watch.
- 94% of respondents provided positive feedback regarding the quality of support offered to them by the OOH Project Coordinator and back-up staff.
  - *BCT intends to bring in more structure to back-up staff contact throughout volunteers' bat watches (e.g. always texting at the end of the bat watch).*
  - *BCT intend to continue the online Facebook page where volunteers can connect with one another in 2019.*
- Feedback on the volunteer manual was generally positive. Some suggestions for improvements were made;
  - *More emphasis on guidance for what to do when vets call for advice.*

- *More general information about UK bat species. This could be brought in as a 'Bat of the Week' email in 2019, as species doesn't affect the advice given.*
  - *More FAQs for difficult/unusual scenarios.*
- Mid-season feedback indicated that 89% of respondents felt that their training day prepared them for taking OOH calls. Reasons given for feeling slightly underprepared are as below;
- *Being unsure what to do when vets call. As mentioned above, this will be addressed in training for the 2019 season.*
  - *Feeling pressure when there are no local volunteer bat carers and no vets. This can be more fully addressed in 2019 training.*

### Following changes made after the 2017 season

- Although no previous OOH volunteers responded in the mid-season feedback, it was reported that the new shorter weekend bat watch system worked well, with 82.4% of respondents stating that the length of bat watches was fine. Those who indicated that bat watches were too long often stated that this was in particular reference to the weekday finish time of 10.30pm.
- Conversely, in the end of season feedback, varied opinions about length of bat watches were given in general questions, with some volunteers indicating they were the right amount of time and some indicating that they were too long.
- *Although not advertised in training sessions, when volunteers requested to carry out shorter bat watches to fit in around other commitments, this was usually accommodated. Positive feedback has been given on the flexibility of bat watch length when required. This is unlikely to be more widely advertised next season, as suggested by a volunteer, as this is likely to result in more complicated and potentially awkward logistics. When individual volunteers do request this however, it will still be considered where appropriate.*
  - *A suggested improvement may be to amend the finishing time of bat watches to 10pm rather than 10.30pm.*
  - *An additional option of amending the start time to be 10am would result in shorter weekend bat watches of 10am-2pm, 2pm-6pm and 6pm-10pm.*

### Feedback from back-up staff

- Back-up staff have reported that their weekend shifts are too long. When this has been raised in previous seasons however, subsequent discussions around a three shift system to mirror the volunteers resulted in the decision that this would not work logistically and would result in a higher amount of weekend shifts.
- One recurring issue raised by back-up staff was volunteers getting bat watch dates and times mixed up, which on occasion resulted in missed bat watches with little notice to find replacement cover.

- *BCT intends to make bat watch schedules clearer and easier to access, with reminder messages being sent early and frequently, thus giving volunteers plenty of notice for any swaps or changes.*

## **Volunteer testimonials**

*'I was surprised at the amount of caring people that took time to call for advice/signposting. One was getting ready for a wedding, another on holiday and packing to return home, another waiting to lock up at work but all took time to call OOH. It was lovely dealing with these types of calls. Everyone wanted a good outcome and I found this uplifting.'*

*'I enjoyed finding out about bats, BCT and talking to people on the phone up and down the nation, and learning new geography of the country. The majority of callers were genuinely concerned with bat welfare and appreciative of the advice we could give.'*

*'The OOH has given me great experience and insight into bat care and the extent the BCT, carers and general public go to to protect bats - it's very rewarding. The BCT are very flexible and it's super convenient to know you're helping whilst sitting at home in your pyjamas! I would recommend volunteering to all fellow bat lovers and conservationists!'*

*'A fantastic volunteering opportunity. Very manageable hours and it's lovely to be able to talk to members of the public who may or may not have experience dealing with wildlife, but who care enough to lend a helping hand.'*

*'A thoroughly interesting and insightful project to be involved with where I felt wholly supported by the BCT team at all times. Their dedication and enthusiasm for bats is contagious and I hope that their efforts have been appreciated and recognised by other volunteers and the general public. I really felt that I was actively helping bats in need. By acting as the facilitator in getting aid where it was due, hopefully many bats have been given a fighting chance. Majority of my calls were highly positive experiences involving very willing members of the public who were thankful in the advice that I was trained to give. Thank you BCT for the opportunity to develop my communication and phone skills alongside contributing to an all-important cause. All UK bats being protected species, I hope that the BCT Out Of Hours Helpline will continue to help bats in years to come!'*

## 10. Acknowledgements

BCT would like to thank all of our volunteers who took part in the project in 2018. The OOH service is an extremely important part of BCT's work; one which we could not provide without the dedication and support of the volunteers involved. We would also like to thank Defra whose funding contributes significantly to the project.

For more information about taking part in the Out of Hours project  
please contact the BCT Helpline

Email Grace at: [outofhours@bats.org.uk](mailto:outofhours@bats.org.uk)

Telephone: 0345 1300 228