

Bats and Trees in Britain

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In Britain, all species of bats are protected. Any structure that they use as a shelter, whether the bats are actually using it at the time or not, is also protected. This means buildings, but must also include trees. Unfortunately the “law can be an ass,” and as we shall see, this one is meaningless in many ways.

There are 14 species of bats listed for the British Isles and all are dependent on trees in some way, at some period of the year, although for two only as hunting habitat. These are the Greater and Lesser Horseshoe (*Rhinolophus* spp.). Others are almost totally tree-dependent. They are the Noctule (*Nyctalus noctula*), its smaller cousin the Leislars (*Nyctalus leisleri*), plus the very rare Bechsteins (*Myotis bechsteinii*) and Barbastelle (*Barbastella barbastellus*).

As in other parts of the world, hollow trunks provide hibernation sites whilst old woodpecker holes and cracks in branches are excellent for other roost requirements. If you cut these trees down, you destroy the bats’ homes. Various insect species are symbiotic with native tree species. Four hundred species are associated with the English oak (*Quercus robur*). The insects are the bats’ food, and when the trees are cut down, you take away the food source. Home and food have gone, so that is the end of the bats. It is happening all over the world. Since 1945, about 35% of the remaining woodland has been cleared for agriculture throughout Britain. One agricultural industrialist who causes habitat destruction in a really bad way told me that oak trees were no longer necessary as the British Navy no longer builds wooden ships!

Many estates have an overpowering desire to tidy up the countryside and turn it into a city park landscape. Old trees have to come down just because they look untidy. The Royal Family recently decided that all the ancient oaks at Windsor, their home just outside London, should come down. The idea is extraordinary. My Royalist loyalties get further stretched! Luckily they were saved because of the force of public opinion.

Trees are thought to be dangerous, often quite incorrectly, and sentenced to death. Highways departments are the most pernicious on this score. Old trees by the roadside are being steadily removed.

Even some trees that are home to bats are not saved entirely. They are just lopped back instead of being felled. Unfortunately, the lopping may include the limb that contained the bats. The safety laws—if you like to call them that—are higher up the pecking order than the laws looking after bats. The old trees in question are, of course, the ones that provide roost sites and food sources.

The destruction is not only in woodland; tree lines and hedgerows throughout lowland Britain are being cleared to make larger field systems as dictated by modern agriculture. Tree lines are essential for bats. Many species follow them as a navigation system and will not cross open country. They provide protection from predators, such as owls, and are a shelter from wind. The wind shelter is essential for insects; without it, they will not fly. So—no shelter—no food for bats.

Since the Second World War, almost all species of bats in Britain have decreased by over 60%. The continuing destruction of habitat (that means trees) must be a major reason. There are others of course, but at present, this could be the worst.

In the Bronze Age, a system of woodland management was developed that was highly friendly to wildlife; known as coppice and standards, it allowed light to reach the forest floor and neighbouring areas in rotation; thus, the ground plants could flourish and consequently, insects also flourished: a food chain was created.

The Second World War changed all the old ways of working the countryside, including forestry. Woodland was left to grow; a 100% canopy cover stopped floor growth. Clear felling of quick-growth, non-native conifers prevailed. Insect numbers were greatly reduced.

Poor Old Bats

I worked partly in woodland management. Now and again I heard horrific stories of chain-saw massacres and the death of colonies as old, broadleaved trees were felled. These happenings were usually hushed up, but I picked up whispers. Bats in torpor cannot wake up and escape quickly enough to avoid these operations. Though some cutters showed concern, the work is cost-high and time cannot be lost looking after bats.

A number of us are now trying to tackle the problem. The actual clear felling of deciduous native woodland has pretty well stopped in the U.K. There are widespread replanting schemes, but it will be a long time before these young forests fill the requirements for bat habitat.

What has not stopped is the widespread destruction of old, over-mature trees, and I see little hope on this score. As ever, the basic problem is the lack of knowledge, understanding, and interest in bats, which, of course, boils down to education.

A lot of us work with schools. The interest shown by children at the primary stage is really great. I walk into a number of schools and am greeted with excited friendly cries of “Hello, Batman,” but it will be a long time before these children can do any more than influence their parents through their enthusiasm.

But the people to get to are those actually working with trees. In the southeast of England last February, we held a symposium. We invited about 150 people who were responsible in one way or another for the management of forests, woodland both private and public, and work on individual trees.

We were not preaching to the converted. We tried to raise people’s awareness of and their interest in bats, and to give an idea of guidelines that should be followed. In fact, we were successful in many quarters and did generate a lot of co-operation. Our necessary work is to keep that co-operation and interest going and spread it through the country without getting people fed up with our attentions.

A number of organizations have asked for co-operation in producing guidelines for their work when there is a danger of it clashing with bat interests. The Bat Conservation Trust is working to produce a leaflet, *Bats and Trees*. Other conservation organizations are interested in producing their own—the more the merrier—more people will be made aware.

There are, though, many obstacles, one of which is the law. The Act that protects bats is badly worded and way down the pecking order. Even if it can be proved that bats use a tree for shelter, as it is termed, that tree has to come down, if it is said to be in a dangerous state where people may be endangered. Also, the law's wording states that one may not intentionally do anything to harm bats. "Intentionally" is not possible to prove, in practice, in a court of law.

I will end on a more hopeful note—we are trying and are having some success in making people think about bats and their use of trees, together with the danger that exists for bats in those trees.

But, . . . it is hard work.