

Night flyers

A garden fit for bats



Common Pipistrelle, by Hugh Clark/NPL

Many of us manage our gardens for birds, butterflies and other daytime visitors, but how many garden with bats in mind? **Joe Nunez-Mino** of the Bat Conservation Trust encourages us to think about what we can do at this time of year to make our gardens bat-friendly for next summer.

There is nothing that gives me more pleasure than watching bats emerge at sunset and start their agile aeronautical chase of flying insects. Luckily, in the UK, you can get to see these free displays in both urban and rural settings. With approximately 80% of us now living in towns and cities of more than 10,000 people, gardens play an ever-increasing role as the places for these encounters. The benefits go beyond simple pleasure, with a growing body of evidence suggesting that contact with nature is beneficial to our sense of physical and psychological well-being.

WAYS TO HELP BATS

The total area covered by gardens in the UK is bigger than the area covered by all our National Parks. In cities such as Sheffield and London gardens make up to 24% of green space but, sadly, we are losing them at an alarming rate. In 2015, the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) reported that the number of front gardens that had been paved over or covered in gravel had tripled in the previous ten years. Bat Conservation Trust are working with the RHS and The Wildlife Trusts on *Wild About Gardens Week* (24 to 30 October 2016). It's one initiative helping to turn this tide by encouraging more people to welcome wildlife into their gardens. This year the focus is to both raise awareness of bats and encourage everyone to make their gardens bat friendly.

The collaboration has produced a booklet with advice and information on some simple steps everyone can take to welcome bats (see opposite). Since all 17 species of bats that breed in the UK eat insects, any feature that benefits insects is likely to benefit bats. Some features, such as having tall, pale or night-scented flowers, can be especially beneficial to bats since they are more likely to attract nocturnal insects.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

The booklet has simple plans to inspire people to make a compost heap, insect hotel or a pond, all of which create different insect habitats. There is also advice on plants and planting in order to provide a consistent supply of insects during the months when bats are not hibernating. Bats are generally active from March through to November, although this will vary from area to area and year to year.

Diversity of planting is a key message, since different bat species specialise in different size prey. For example, Brown Long-eared Bats will eat much larger moths than Common Pipistrelles. Maintaining or increasing the diversity of structure, such as having trees and shrubs, can be equally important at increasing insect densities by providing food and shelter. Gardeners can provide further shelter by installing bat boxes. A plan for a simple bat box, the Kent bat box, is also provided as part of the resources of *Wild About Gardens Week*.

DANGERS IN THE GARDEN

Gardens can be dangerous places for bats too, and one of the greatest threats is predation by domestic cats. A large proportion of injured bats reported to the National Bat Helpline (0345 1300 228) are victims of cat attacks, and most do not survive. Keeping cats in at night or, at a minimum, just before and after sunset could make a real difference to bats and other wildlife.

Artificial lighting can also impact negatively on bats. We are only just beginning to understand how artificial light impacts on different species but for many it acts as an impenetrable barrier. Recent BTO research has revealed that different types of street lighting can significantly affect numbers of moths found in urban gardens, which is likely to have knock-on effects on bats.

Honeysuckle, with its long flower tubes, attracts long-tongued moths, which in turn are a food source for bats.

Honeysuckle, by Paul Sterry/Nature Photographers Ltd



KNOW YOUR BATS

Once you have turned your garden into a bat haven, you'll want to know what species are visiting. This is a tricky ask without a bat detector, but there are some characteristics that can help with identification of the most widespread species that are likely to visit gardens (see below). To find out more about bats in your area please do contact your local bat group. While common bats can be recorded for BTO Garden BirdWatch, you can also help with bat-specific monitoring by joining in with the National Bat Monitoring Programme; there are surveys suitable for all levels of experience.

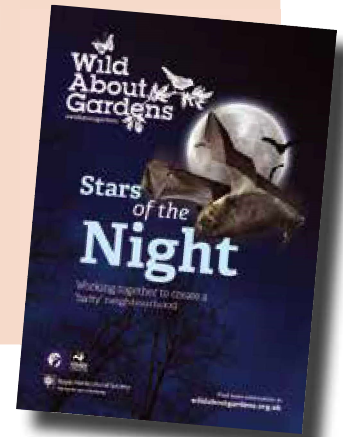
For more information about bat surveys and identification, please visit www.bats.org.uk.

Stars of the Night

Visit the *Wild About Gardens Week* website to download your free guide to creating a bat-friendly garden, created by the Bat Conservation Trust, the RHS and the Wildlife Trusts.

This booklet contains information on which plants will encourage bats, helpful hints and tips for the garden, and guides to making a bat box and creating a wildlife pond.

www.wildaboutgardensweek.org.uk



Noctules are among the earliest bats to emerge in the evenings; they can often be seen flying as it starts to get dark. They have long narrow wings and are typically seen flying in a straight line very high up. Their flight can be interrupted with sudden swoops to catch an insect. The Noctule is one of our largest bats, appearing to be about the same size as a Starling.



Brown Long-eared Bats tend to come out well after dark and are harder to spot than some other species. They are medium sized, and are typically seen flying very close to trees, sometimes flying in and out of the branches. Their broad wings and tail allow slow, highly manoeuvrable, hovering flight, which has been likened to that of a large butterfly!



Pipistrelle species are particularly hard to tell apart; there are three species in the UK that look very similar: the Common Pipistrelle, the Soprano Pipistrelle and the rarer Nathusius' Pipistrelle. These are the bats you are most likely to see in your garden. They emerge around sunset and have an erratic flight as they twist and turn in the chase for tiny insects.



Daubenton's Bats are strongly associated with water, so if you have a large pond, river or other water body adjacent to your garden it's worth watching out for this species. They have a steady flight just a few centimetres above the water surface, described as looking like a small hovercraft. They may skim the water as they grab insects, sometimes using their tail membrane as a scoop.