

Bats on the River Dour

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For centuries, bats have been called sinister and spooky, likely because of their bead-like eyes and razor-sharp canine teeth. But there's more to these nocturnal creatures than meets the eye.

So why this article on bats?

Bats love water where they can find a feast of insect life: their larder.

A great spot to see and identify them (with a bat detector) is Kearsney Abbey, that beautiful expanse of the River Dour.

There are more than 1300 species of bats in the world, making them the second most common group of mammals after rodents. Some weigh just two grammes, while others have a wingspan of six feet, but all are impressive and vital members of their ecosystems.

The scientific name for bats is Chiroptera, Greek for 'handwing'- they have four long fingers and a thumb, each connected to the next by a thin layer of skin, the flexibility of which allows them to change direction swiftly and catch insects in mid-air. They are the only flying mammals in the world.

There are two main types of bats: microbats and megabats. Most bats are microbats, which eat insects that come out at night.

The UK has 18 bat species, 17 of which are known to breed here. Tiny Nathusius's pipastrelles are particular fans of lakes and canals. Very occasionally, though, they have been known to turn up on oil rigs out in the North Sea, suggesting that they fly across the sea. In the last couple of years it's

been confirmed that two pipistrelles have migrated over from the continent, with one travelling from as far away as Latvia.

Bats are very important to the environment and thus human life. These insect-eating microbats consume millions of bugs a night, acting as a natural pest control for plants.

To navigate dark caves and hunt after dark, microbats rely on echolocation, a system that allows them to locate objects using sound waves. They echolocate by making a high-pitched sound that travels until it hits an object and bounces back to them. This echo tells them an object's size and how far away it is.

As insects are scarce in winter, bats seek somewhere with a constant cool temperature where they will be undisturbed to hibernate. The ideal hibernation temperature is usually between 1.1 and 4.4 degrees Celsius, which is why places like caves and mines are ideal.

In Kent they have been found using places like chalk caves, dene holes, ice houses and disused buildings. Although small numbers hang free, they usually squeeze into cracks and crevices.

When bats hibernate, their body temperature can drop to near freezing and their heart rate drops to about 10 beats per minute. That means that they can go minutes without taking a breath! Other bodily functions also slow down to help conserve energy. This state of being is called torpor. During their hibernation, bats will cycle through periods of torpor –

they may enter the state of torpor for just a few hours on an especially cold day, or they might stay in torpor for months!

In the state called torpor, their body temperature falls and their metabolic rate slows, meaning they use less energy and, while their insect food source is unavailable, can survive on the fat they have stored up. Being aroused from hibernation can cost bats a lot of energy, and the loss of body fat can lead to starvation. They wake naturally at times during hibernation, usually to feed opportunistically, when temperatures are warm enough for insects to be flying, or to move to another roosting site.

Bats play an important role in many habitats around the world. Some tropical

plants depend partly or wholly on certain bat species to pollinate their flowers or spread their seeds, while many bats, including all British species, help control insects by feeding on them. In the UK, some bats are 'indicator species', because changes to these bat populations can indicate changes in aspects of biodiversity. They might suffer when there are declines in insect populations or when habitats are destroyed or poorly managed (for example, some bats live solely in large or old woodlands).

Bat numbers are declining, due mainly to the loss of roosts and feeding areas and the increased use of pesticides. Kent is probably under greater pressure for change to the environment than anywhere else in Britain.

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