

# Another wildlife scare story. This time bats and rabies...



A serotine bat: only 1 has ever been found with the EBLV virus in Britain. Of 15,000 bats tested, only 23 tested positive - all daubenton's. © M Nolf

**Sweet little bats:** Tonight, I celebrate my gloves, for you. (Sorry...!). I've seen a few British newspapers and online sites reporting on 'rabies fears' this week, with some writers screaming about 'rabid bats'. I work a lot with bats, and I am not worried, except about any misunderstanding leading to bat persecution.

Bats are our brilliant friends. Below I've outlined all you need to know about this so-called rabies 'fear'. I've written it because misinformation can be dangerous and undermine conservation.

After all, we've just seen in the news how a boiler-suited, toxic army responded to 10 panic-stricken schools by spraying the wildlife to oblivion over unfounded fears about false widow spiders.

Elsewhere, we are experiencing badger, raptor and fox persecution, and more besides. We don't need bats being added to that list. Their numbers have already declined hugely, and some British bat species are now rare.

I hope everyone will apply sensible caution instead of fear, because the risk of the rabies type virus is extremely low in Britain, and does not even apply to the general public, probably 99.9% of the time. Here are the facts:

\* This week, a new strain of a rabies-type virus, known as European Bat Lyssavirus (EBLV) type 1, was found in one UK bat for the first time ever. This virus was already known to be present in Europe. A similar type 2 EBLV virus was already present in Britain, but had only been recorded very rarely.

\* This is not classical rabies, like that which is found in dogs and other big mammals. That virus strain has never been recorded in a native European bat species. What we have instead is a related virus. It can be transferred by a bite or scratch from an infected animal, or if the bat's saliva comes into contact with your eyes, mouth or nose.

\* Lisa Worledge at the Bat Conservation Trust has advised bat workers and volunteers: "The virus was already known to be present in serotine bat populations in a number of other European countries including France, so this is not unexpected. It has also been recorded rarely in other species of bats in Europe, including natterer's bats."

She added: "We have known of the presence of EBLV2 at a low level in our [UK] daubenton's bat population for a number of years. We have had at least one or two cases every year over the past few years."

But she stressed: "This latest positive case, especially coming from a species other than daubenton's bat, acts as a good reminder of just how important it is for people to follow best practice when handling any species of bat and to report even a small nip, scratch or bite as soon as possible."

\* The single British serotine bat carrying the newly discovered type 1 virus was found grounded by a member of the public, in Dorset.



Don't do this at home! A daubenton's bat. In Britain, they very rarely carry EBLV, but handlers should always wear gloves. © G San Martin.

\* The Bat Conservation Trust said there have also been 5 recent cases of daubenton's bats testing positive for the other EBLV type 2 virus, in Northumberland, Sussex and West Lothian, plus an earlier one on the Cambridgeshire/Lincolnshire border. The Sussex cases this summer involved a

maternity roost. Bat researchers think the hot summer probably caused most if not all of the bats' deaths, not rabies.

#### HOW SMALL IS THE RISK?

Sadly, in 2002, one bat helper in Scotland died from infection with EBLV type 2, but it was the only known death in more than 100 years from a wild animal encounter occurring within the UK. Other rabies type infections have involved Brits contracting the virus abroad, and there have been 5 human deaths in Europe since 1977 from EBLV where people did not have a vaccine before or after being bitten. There have been 16 non-fatal human infections in the UK detected through bat monitoring work.

In Britain, only people who handle bats are generally at any risk, and it's an extremely low risk, because the virus is so rarely found in British bats. Furthermore, bats are shy, non-aggressive animals and very unlikely to bite you unless they feel threatened, so there is virtually no chance of exposure unless a person handles a bat. Those people just need to take precautions, which they normally do anyway.

Also, it is illegal to disturb a bat roost in the UK without a licence, so the public are unlikely to be handling bats unless they are professional bat workers or trained conservation volunteers operating on a licence, following safe methods.

One exception is if you find an injured or dead bat. In all cases, anyone handling a bat should wear gloves and it's better not to handle a bat unless you have

had training or advice, for the bat's sake as well as yours, and not forgetting they are legally protected.

If you find a grounded or injured bat, please call the Bat Conservation Trust's Bat Helpline on 0345 1300 228. They will advise you what to do and usually put you in touch with a local bat rescue volunteer team.

#### CORPSE APPEAL

If you find a dead bat, before handling it contact the helpline or email [enquiries@bats.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@bats.org.uk) for details of how to send it away for testing to the Animal & Plant Health Agency (APHA) who will be delighted to receive it.

The APHA team are doing research on this virus and have appealed for more dead bats to be sent to them. They are most interested in daubenton's, natterer's, brandt's, serotines and vagrants such as the common bent-winged bats, but all species are accepted.

Along with a Scottish Government surveillance scheme, they have been monitoring the risk by testing dead bats found in the UK since 1986.

They have tested more than 15,000 bats including around 500 daubenton's bats and 200 serotines. Only 24 out of all those bats were infected; including 23 daubenton's bats with EBLV type 2 and the one serotine bat this week with EBLV type 1. No infected bats have ever been found in Ireland.

## IN SUMMARY

Bats are a vital part of Britain's ecosystem, their numbers have declined severely and they need our support, not fear or alienation. Bats and their roosts are legally protected. They often live in houses without us knowing, but without us needing to worry.

Wear gloves, get the rabies vaccine and training before you handle bats. Public Health England advises people to see a GP or call NHS direct on 111 immediately after being bitten or scratched by a bat even if they've had the vaccine.

Bat Conservation Trust rabies advice:

[www.bats.org.uk/pages/-bats\\_and\\_rabies-1099.html](http://www.bats.org.uk/pages/-bats_and_rabies-1099.html)

Public Health England rabies advice: [bit.ly/2ljWhJr](https://bit.ly/2ljWhJr)

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I write about, teach and do ecology ☺