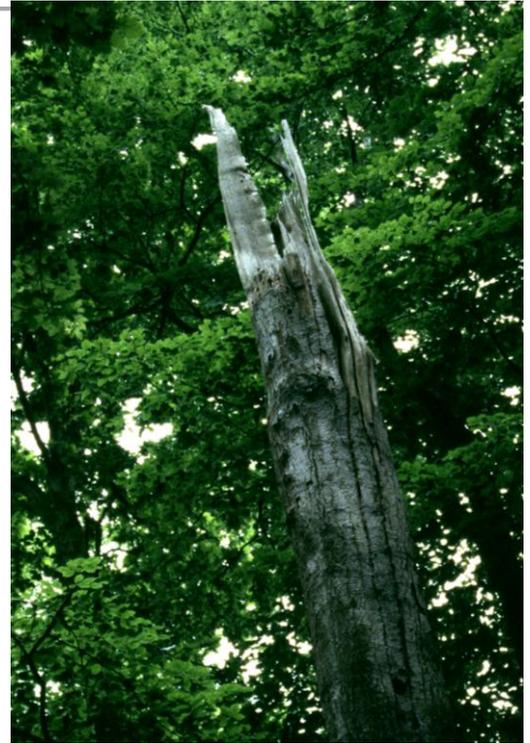


Tree Roosts

We think of bats as roosting in caves and buildings, but this is only part of the story. Bats found roosts long before people started to build houses for them, and many areas, including Bedfordshire, lack natural caves. Most of the time, bats clearly had to find other places to roost, and that means trees.

Unlike birds, bats don't dig out or modify their roosts. When bats roost in trees, they therefore have to rely on natural damage or holes made by birds – they are not equipped to create their own holes or crevices. Bats frequently use woodpecker holes, natural splits or cracks and even loose bark that is flaking away from a branch.

stain
below the
roost hole.
This
seems to
be



particularly true of Daubenton's bats which



produce large amounts of urine as a result of feeding on insects on the surface of water. In the absence of these hints, we have to rely on seeing bats emerge from a tree hole, or return at dawn – not the easiest thing to do if you don't know which tree to watch.

How can we spot a bat roost in a tree?

Very often, we can't. But a large roost, such as a maternity roost, can be a noisy place, with the bats squeaking and interacting. We have located noctule roosts at Stockgrove by the sounds made by the bats during the day as they hang in the cavity behind a woodpecker hole. Roosts occupied for a prolonged period may accumulate sufficient urine to produce a conspicuous dark

Dawn Swarming

Bats can be very hard to spot when they emerge from a roost, unless you know exactly where to look. Even then, if the roost is in a tree it may well be in the shadows of the crown and too dark to see at dusk. When bats leave a roost, they swoop down and away very quickly, and a momentary

glimpse is the most you can hope for. Just before dawn, however, things can be a little easier. Bats will often swarm around the roost for several minutes before entering, giving you a chance to spot them and locate the roost. If the roost is a large one, there can be twenty or thirty bats circling at a time.

Bob Cornes

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Moving house

Many tree-roosting bats change roosts frequently – every two or three nights in some cases. We don't know why they do it, although there are lots of suggestions. They may be moving away from accumulated urine and droppings, or from parasites such as fleas and mites. Whatever the reason, it means that there needs to be a good supply of suitable roosts in a small area for the bats to be able to change roosts whenever they need to. By radio-tracking barbastelles roosting in a small wood in Cambridgeshire, we have so far found 12 different roosting trees in a small area of the wood. Some of these are dead or dying, and the long-term future of that bat colony depends on the wood having a constant supply of roosting trees to replace those that are being lost. Protecting the bats means maintaining the woodland, and not just safeguarding one or two roosts.

What about bat boxes?



Bat boxes can be used as artificial tree roosts by many species of bat, but they need to be put up with care. Different species of bat have different preferences for their roosts, and bat boxes sometimes favour common species such as pipistrelles, at the expense of rare species such as barbastelles. Bat boxes are probably best used on buildings rather than in woodland, unless there is a specific reason for providing a particular kind of bat box in a particular wood.