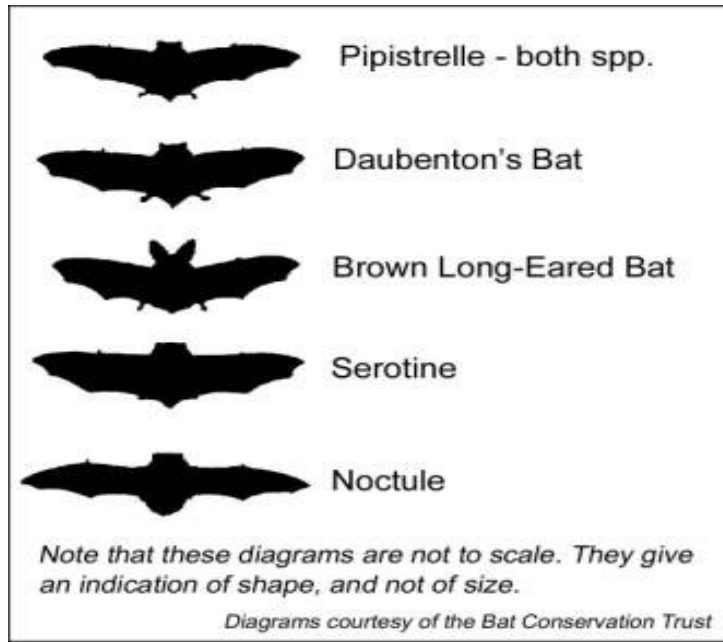




How to recognize different kinds of bats from quite a long way away

Most of the bats you spot will give you a fleeting glimpse at best, so how do you cultivate the ability to recognise it's "jizz"?



Bob Cornes has some suggestions

One of the most frustrating (or fascinating, depending on your point of view) things about bats is that they are very difficult to tell apart. Can a fleeting glimpse of a bat, in the semi-darkness and often at a considerable distance, ever give us enough information to make an identification? If we're aiming for absolute certainty, the answer has to be no, but it's often possible to narrow the possibilities down considerably. With the aid of a bat detector and some experience, we can identify some species (but by no means all) to near certainty.

In Bedfordshire, we have 11 or 12 species to consider as possibilities. The 'big five' species we are most likely to encounter are the Common and Soprano Pipistrelles, the Noctule, the Brown Long-Eared Bat and Daubenton's Bat. With practice, it is not too difficult to tell these apart in favourable conditions, although separating the two pipistrelle species is impossible without a bat detector. It is essential to bear in mind, though, that for each of the 'big five', there is at least one rarer species that could be confused with it.

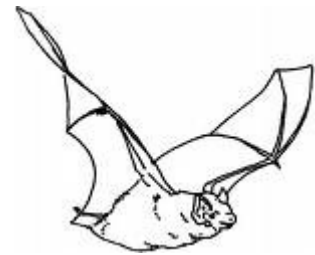
Identifying the Big Five



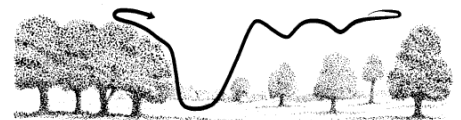
Pipistrelles are the commonest bats, in Bedfordshire as in other parts of the UK. They are small, and can be found flying in any habitat. Their most obvious characteristic is their 'flittering' pattern of flight, with frequent turns and shallow swoops. A bat detector with the frequency setting adjusted to produce the loudest sound will show a frequency of near 45 kHz for the Common Pipistrelle and near 55 kHz for the Soprano Pipistrelle



The Noctule



is a large species with long narrow wings. It tends to fly straight and high (above tree-top height), but will make steep dives when feeding. On a bat detector, it sounds loudest at 20 kHz or so, and is very loud indeed. Children can often hear Noctules without using a bat detector.



The Brown Long-Eared Bat, although common, is rarely seen



because it usually flies in dense vegetation in woodland. It is a

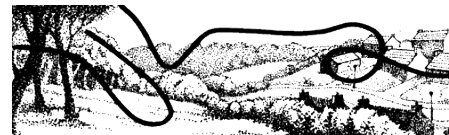


medium-sized species with broad wings. Its flight is slow and very manoeuvrable, and it can hover for a few seconds at a time. It is said that, in ideal conditions, it is possible to see its ears which are about as long as the rest of its body (but I can only say that I never have). On a bat detector, it is so quiet as to be inaudible unless it is within 3 or 4 metres of the detector. It is by far the most difficult of the 'big five' to see.



We usually see all of the 'big five' at our regular surveys at Stockgrove Country Park on alternate Monday evenings. If you join us on 2 or 3 of these surveys, you will be well set up to recognize pipistrelles, Noctules, Brown Long-Eared Bats and Daubenton's Bats.

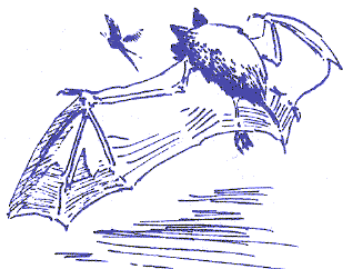
It is a little easier to distinguish Serotines from Noctules. **Serotines** are as large as Noctules, but have broad rather than narrow wings, and fly lower than Noctules. They tend to feed on insects on hedges or near the ground.



Daubenton's Bat



belongs to the *Myotis* group, and is sometimes very difficult to tell apart from the others (Natterer's, Brandt's and Whiskered Bats). It is smallish, with fairly broad wings. The only reliable way to identify it is when it is feeding over water. It flies at a constant height of 1-5 cm above the water and occasionally snatches insects from the water with its feet.



On a bat detector, it produces rapid clicking sounds with no obvious change in volume when the frequency setting is adjusted.

Possible points of confusion

Some features of bats are particularly unreliable when you are trying to identify them in flight. In particular, size can be very hard to assess. All experienced bat watchers have heard the less experienced say "Look – there's some large ones and some small ones" when watching a group of pipistrelles. It is safest not to consider size differences unless they are very obvious. Colour is also very difficult to judge. It is true that Noctules are orangey-brown, and that only the *Myotis* bats and the Brown Long-Eared have pale bellies, but you are very unlikely to see these differences in flying bats. It is best to avoid shining torches at flying bats – it doesn't help because the torchlight causes more rather than less confusion, and it will almost certainly disturb the bats and cause them to move away.

In woodland and at head height or higher over water, the *Myotis* bats cannot safely be told apart. There is also the possibility of confusing Brown Long-Eared Bat and Natterer's Bat when using a bat detector.

That just leaves the Barbastelle. **Barbastelles** are distinctive, but rarely seen. They are medium-sized bats with broad wings. They tend to fly in straight lines in woodland or along hedgerows, sometimes just below tree-top height and sometimes considerably lower. They sound different from the other species on a bat detector, with calls that sound like loud heavy clicks (like castanets, some have said), loudest at 30-35 kHz but inaudible above about 45 kHz. A time-expansion or frequency division detector is needed for certain identification.

The rarer species

We have evidence of the rare **Nathusius' Pipistrelle** in Bedfordshire. Identifying it in flight is impossible without the aid of a time-expansion bat detector. It is therefore likely to be mistaken for Common Pipistrelle.



There are two species that could be confused with the Noctule. We have no unambiguous records of **Leisler's Bat** in Bedfordshire, but it is very similar to the Noctule and, if it is seen, it is likely to be misidentified.

It should be obvious from all this that identifying bats in flight is a tricky business, but well worth trying. Remember when you send in a record that the species identification will probably be listed as 'unconfirmed' if it is based on a bat in flight. This simply reflects the fact that 100% certainty is impossible. If you've been able to narrow down the possibilities using the guidelines above, your possible or probable identification will still be useful

Another excellent way to get better at identifying bats is to use `Jones & Walsh's Field Studies: Council's leaflet. A bargain at £2.50 for a laminated copy. It can be ordered for the FSC website.



*OK that's more than enough theory.
Now its time to head off and get
looking. There's a copy of the record
form on the next page so you can
refer back to it. Remember "All
records are useful". Happy
Hunting.*

