

BAT BOXES

YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

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Which box should I choose?

Bat boxes are now available from many outlets, and in a range of shapes and sizes, so some knowledge of bats' preferences will help you choose the best possible box. Bats are sensitive animals, so to increase the chances of them using the box the following tips should be borne in mind

- Bats do not like draughts. The entrance slit should be no more than 15-20mm wide, and there should be no gaps where the sides and top join.
- A box that cannot be opened from the top is best, as it will have fewer gaps for draughts, and will lessen the chances of the bats being disturbed. Bats may unintentionally be injured if the box is opened, for example by damaging their feet and legs. A special license is required in the UK to disturb bats and to handle them.
- If the box is made of wood it should be rough sawn and untreated. Bats cannot hang from smooth surfaces, and can be poisoned by any timber treatment chemicals. Wooden boxes will last for approximately ten years.
- Boxes made of woodcrete (a mixture of wood and concrete) have been successful in attracting bats.
- Weathered boxes are likely to be more attractive to bats.

Where is the best place to position the box?

- To increase the chance of it being used, locate the box at a site where bats are known to feed that is sheltered from strong winds and exposed to the sun for part of the day.
- Unlike birds and rodents, bats do not build nests. Warm roost temperatures are important in summer to pregnant and lactating females and their young. In winter bats need constant cool temperatures for hibernation.
- Ideally, put up two or three boxes facing in different directions to provide a range of temperature conditions. For example, boxes facing from south-east to south-west allow the sun to fall on each box for part of the day. During very hot days a south-facing box may overheat, but the other boxes should have some shade during the day.
- Bat boxes should be located close to a linear vegetation feature such as a tree line or hedgerow. Some bat species use these features for navigation between their roosting site and feeding ground and to avoid flying in open and exposed areas.
- Ensure that branches or other items will not impede the bats' approach to the box – clear away underneath the box so the bats can land easily before crawling into the box.

On trees

- Most species will use higher positioned boxes (around 5m high), although long-eared bats may use a box 1.5m above the ground.
- If you are locating boxes in public areas consider the possibility of vandalism and of the box being accessible to cats.

- Place the box as high as it is safe to do.
- Use headless or domed nails not fully hammered home to allow the tree to push the box off without splitting, or strap the box to the tree. Iron nails can be used on trees with no commercial value.
- Copper nails can be used on conifers, but aluminium alloy nails are less likely to damage saws and chipping machinery.

On buildings

- Placing the boxes high up by the eaves on a building will reduce the likelihood of the bats falling prey to cats or humans.
- As with trees the aspect of the box should capture sun for part of the day. North or north-easterly sited boxes will have little chance of being used as summer roosts because the box will not be warmed by the sun, but may be used by hibernating bats.

Other structures

- Poles, gazebos, garden walls and sheds have been suggested. However, the main danger is that the boxes are not high enough above the ground and are too visible to predators.

How many boxes?

- Two or three boxes will always be preferable to one, but a single box has a chance of being used, although this depends on the species that use the local area.
- Three boxes per tree can be arranged around the trunk of larger trees. This is especially desirable in larger coniferous plantations.

How long before bats will use the box?

- It may take several years for the bats to find the box. Be patient!
- It is highly unlikely bats will shift their roost from a well-used site (e.g. in a roof) to a newly positioned box.
- There may be plenty of other suitable roosting sites in the area.

How will I know if the box has been successful?

- To check if the box is being used, look out for droppings, urine staining, listen for 'chattering' and watch the box for a few an hours either side of sunset to observe any bats leaving to feed.

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