



Above: Batso, a two inch long Common Pipistrelle

Bats and Balls

Mark Elliott meets a couple who have gone batty over their new house guests

KEN and Kathryn Ball were enjoying a relaxing glass of wine in their garden when the panic began. 'It was the shock of our lives,' said Ken. 'We saw smoke billowing from our roof and thought the house was on fire.'

Kathryn was about to phone the fire brigade when she realised the clouds weren't smoke but bats, pouring out of a gap in their roof.

Hundreds of the tiny creatures had been roosting under the eaves and were now heading out to hunt. 'It was a real shock - we were convinced our house was on fire. It was a relief when we realised the truth' said Ken.

Ken and Kathryn moved into their house in Outerside, near Keswick, four years ago but had never before seen so many bats. 'We'd occasionally see individual bats in our garden, usually chasing midges, but to see bats in such large numbers was a total surprise.'

Relieved there was no emergency, Ken and Kathryn

deliberated what to do next. 'We rang the Bat Helpline for some advice. They sent two of their people to survey the house,' said Kathryn.

Using bat detectors - electronic gadgets which identify the unique frequencies different species of bat emit when hunting - they ascertained that the couple could have up to three species of bat living in their house, the Common Pipistrelle, Natterer's and Noctule. The bat conservation team counted 44 bats on their first visit, but subsequent counts have revealed up to 500.

'From what we've been told, our roof is a maternity roost where bats come to raise their young. The bats then find other places to roost over winter,' said Ken.

Many species of bat are in serious decline due to human impact. Their natural roosts include caves and hollow trees. In many areas, humans have changed the landscape affecting their habitats and the insects they support, forcing bats to find alternative places to roost. Droppings and discolouration around cracks or holes in walls may give away their presence.

Bats use buildings at any time of year but are most often found in houses between May and August. Mothers gather in maternity roosts to have their young in summer. They only have one baby a year and suckle it for several



weeks. When the mothers go to hunt they leave their youngsters behind in a group crèche.

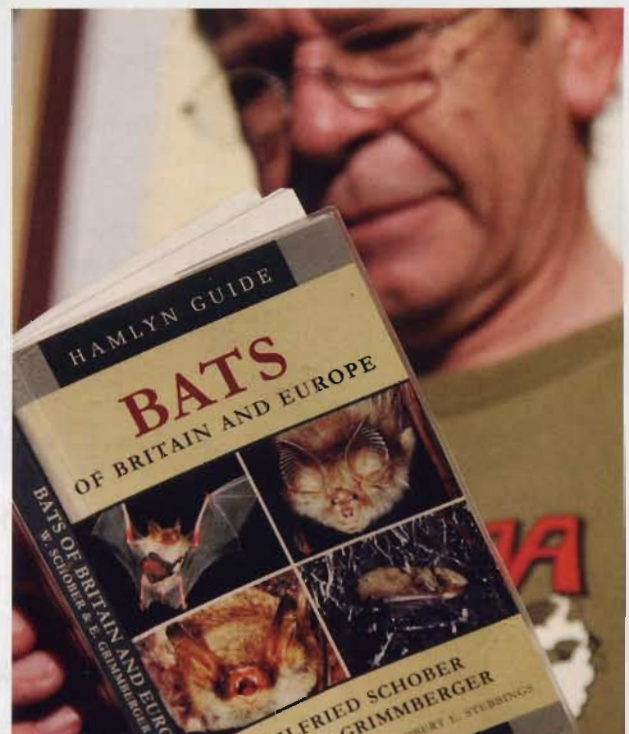
By September, when the young can fly and feed themselves, the bats tend to move away from these roosts. A few adult males and immature individuals may continue to occupy buildings throughout the year.

Since discovering their new house guests, Ken and Kathryn acknowledge that bats have become part of their lives and they are even planning to have a clause written into the deeds of their house to ensure bats can always roost there. Bat watching in the evening and early morning has become a popular pastime for them and family and friends regularly turn up to see the spectacle too.

Ken and Kathryn also rehabilitate baby bats that fall from their roost. 'We often find the tiny creatures in the morning. They are often wet through and suffering from hypothermia,' said Ken.

They do their best to save the youngsters by taking them inside, drying them and keeping them warm. They also feed them on mealworms and goats milk to build-up their strength.

'It's a great feeling when you see them finally fly after being so close to death,' said Kathryn.



Top: Ken reads up on his new house guests
Above: The Balls with Batso, the blogging bat



Bat rescue

If the bat is obviously injured or is grounded, find out whether there is a local bat carer in your area by calling the Bat Helpline on 0845 1300 228. If not, take the bat to the vet and remember to always wear gloves when handling bats.

If you find a bat during the day it may be suffering from hypothermia.

If the bat does not appear to be injured, release it that evening if the weather is mild. If you find the bat during the day, keep it in a warm place for the rest of the day. If it is windy or raining do not release the bat that evening, but phone the Bat Helpline the next morning for advice.

They have named their latest patient, a tiny Common Pipistrelle, 'Batso'. At only two inches long, with a wingspan of eight inches, he weighs the same as a ten pence piece. However, he is putting on so much weight; they are a little concerned that he may be too heavy to fly away. A pipistrelle's natural diet includes midges, caddis flies, lace wings and small moths.

Batso eats mealworms which are delivered by mail order, from a company in Sheffield. The local community is very supportive too - a neighbour, who owns a smallholding, hearing about their tiny guest, recently left a bottle of fresh goat's milk on their doorstep for Batso.

Pipistrelles like to live in very confined spaces. Gaps behind fallen tiles, weather boarding and eaves provide suitable lodgings for them. They can squeeze through small holes or cracks of only half an inch wide. Batso's temporary home is a cardboard tube in a small fish tank. He likes to hang by one foot while warming himself against the nearby radiator. 'He's a real character,' said Ken. 'He doesn't like being put back into his tank after being fed - he clings onto you and whines at you. I think he likes the attention.'

And Ken and Kathryn aren't Batso's only fans, he now has his own blog - <http://fatso-batso.blogspot.com/>, and receives emails from around the globe.

Ken and Kathryn have mixed feelings about the day Batso flies away. Though they want nothing more than to see him back in the wild, there will be a twinge of sadness too because Batso has become part of the family.



Top: Batso relaxes in his tank
Above: Ken and Kathryn watching bats in their garden

Bat facts

- There are 17 species of bat in Britain. Eight have been recorded in Cumbria: Common Pipistrelle, Soprano Pipistrelle, Daubenton's, Natterer's, Whiskered, Brandt's, Noctule and Brown Long-Eared
- A single bat can eat over 3000 midges in one night
- Bats 'see' in the dark by means of echolocation, high frequency sound which works in a similar way to radar
- Bats are not rodents, and will not nibble or gnaw at wood, wires or insulation
- Bats are clean and sociable animals and spend many hours grooming themselves

For more information about bats visit:

www.cumbriabats.org.uk

www.bats.org.uk

www.english-nature.org.uk