

Bats are fascinating creatures – and watching their acrobatic antics can be a real pleasure. Although often associated with Hallowe'en, you're more likely to see bats swooping over your garden during the summer months when airborne insects are in abundance.

There are several old wives tales surrounding bats. One of the most common is that they'll get caught in your hair – and at times the bats on our smallholding have swooped so close to our heads that it's easy to understand how this misconception came about.

However, it's unlikely that such a mishap will occur. Bats have a highly sophisticated navigation system – known as echolocation – that prevents a bat from colliding with any nearby object (such as a head) and enables it to accurately locate even the tiniest of insects, such as midges. And a single bat can eat as many as 3,000 insects in one night, so echolocation must work pretty well.

The old adage 'as blind as a bat' would suggest that bats have poor eyesight, but in fact they can see almost as well as humans – if we had to hunt for food in the dark we might need echolocation too!

Bats are one of only three British mammals that truly hibernate – the other two being hedgehogs and dormice. There are 18 different species of bat in the UK, with 17 breeding in this country. The tiny common pipistrelle, which weighs just 5g – that's less than a £1 coin – is one of the most UK's most common bat species, and can be found in a wide range of habitats, including farmland and smallholdings.

To attract bats to the smallholding, you need to provide them with a readily available food source. All species of British bats only eat insects, and you can encourage more insects to visit your plot by adding some insect-friendly, nectar-rich plants.

Planting a wide range of native trees, shrubs, herbs and flowers will attract a large variety of different insects. Night-scented plants, such as nicotiana, honeysuckle, jasmine and night-scented stock are particularly good as these sweet smelling flowers will attract night-flying insects. Pale blooms are useful too, as they are easier for insects to see as light fades at dusk.

Fruit trees are ideal – bats are often common in orchard areas – and are great for other types of wildlife, too, such as birds and bumblebees.

Trees and shrubs attract insects and also provide roosting sites for bats. And don't forget water: ponds, streams and



Brown long-eared bat: © Hugh Clark/www.bats.org.uk

# Give bats a hand

Attract bats onto your smallholding.  
Penny Bunting explains how

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ditches give bats somewhere to drink – and many of the flies that bats love to eat start life as aquatic larvae, so freshwater features provide food too.

Just like birds, bats need a place to roost. Old barns and outbuildings or holes in trees are often present on smallholdings and make perfect roosting sites. Or consider installing a bat box or two. Position such boxes as high as possible, preferably in a sheltered, sunny spot and close to hedges or trees – bats use these features for navigation, so will find their way to the box more easily. The Bat Conservation Trust offers instructions for

an easy-to-make bat box at [www.bats.org.uk](http://www.bats.org.uk).

Cats can be a danger to bats – especially at dusk when bats are just emerging from the roost. If you know you have bats roosting on your smallholding, you can help protect them by bringing your cat inside about half an hour before sunset. And if your cat does catch a bat, contact the Bat Conservation Trust Bat Helpline on 0845 1300 228 for advice on how to help it. *Penny Bunting is a smallholder and writer living in the Peak District. She also runs award-winning environmental project Little Green Space: [www.littlegreenspace.org.uk/](http://www.littlegreenspace.org.uk/)*