

Bats in Ireland

Bats are found on every continent of the world, except Antarctica. The highest number of species are found in warm countries around the equator. There are many different types of bat and their diets can vary. Bats in the tropics eat many different foods: fruit, fish, insects, pollen, frogs and even other bats! Here in Ireland, where there are ten different species, bats only eat insects. Common and Soprano Pipistrelle bats are the smallest bats in Ireland, weighing only a few grams and measuring 33–48 mm in length. Leisler's bats are the largest, though in comparison to bats elsewhere in the world, they are not very big (50–69 mm).

Groups such as Bat Conservation Ireland and the Cork County Bat Group carry out bat conservation work in Ireland. Find web links on page 10.



Bats are the only mammals that can truly fly. Their wings, which are like webbed hands, have membrane stretching out over extended finger bones. These wings can change shape quickly and so help the bat steer and brake. Being mammals, bats are warm-blooded and have bodies which are covered in fur. They can be as large as a small dog or as small as a bee. The large flying fox has a wingspan of over 1.5m, while the tiny hog-nosed bat has a head and body length measuring only 2.5–3.0 cm.

In Ireland, as the temperatures begin to warm up in late spring and summer the bats become more active and begin searching for food at night. Female bats come together in a nursery roost, forming a colony. Nursery roosts must be warm, undisturbed and close to a source of insects. Bats don't build nests. Instead, they hang upside down or else hide in cracks and crevices. They give birth in June or July to a single baby, which will suckle its mother for milk. A baby bat, known as a pup, is born blind and without fur. It weighs a third of the weight of its mother.

As food is less plentiful during the winter, bats hibernate. Males and females move into a hibernation roost. There they lower their body temperature and heartbeat and go to sleep.

They wake occasionally during mild spells to eat and drink.

The average lifespan of an Irish bat is 7–8 years, though some live for up to 20+ years.



Images courtesy of Mollie CC-BY-NC-SA-2.0 Generic

The Common Pipistrelle Bat - Ireland's smallest bat.



Vampire Bats

Vampire bats are the only bats to eat blood. They feed on cattle, horses, pigs and large birds. However, they don't actually suck the blood. First they make a small hole with their two sharp incisor teeth and then lap up the blood as it pours out (the bat's saliva prevents the blood from clotting). Don't worry, there are no vampire bats in Ireland and they are not in Transylvania either! They are native to Central America and South America.



The largest colony of bats in the world!

Bracken Cave, near San Antonio in central Texas, is home to over 20 million Mexican free-tailed bats. It is the largest colony of bats in the world. Bats that overwinter in Mexico, return there in March and April to produce their young. As they give birth, the cave becomes packed with life, with over 5000 bats per square metre!

Bats and Echolocation

The saying "Blind as a Bat" is far from true. Though bats are born blind they gain eyesight after about 8 or 9 days. Some species of bats have great eyesight and some not so good. Bats use echolocation to help them catch food at night. As they fly, they emit a high-pitch sound (too high for humans to hear), which bounces off objects and returns back to them as an echo. From this they are able to create a picture of their surroundings in their minds.

