

Bat Conservation Trust



Wearing Gloves When Handling Bats

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1. Introduction

BCT encourages bat workers to wear gloves when they are handling bats, particularly when dealing with the general public. This policy was formulated in collaboration with Defra and Public Health England, and is strongly supported by the Animal & Plant Health Agency. BCT has provided information on the types of gloves that are appropriate for different species (see section 2 of this document). We also have a policy that any photographs or videos used or shared by BCT that show bats being handled must show the person wearing gloves.

BCT has produced a number of fact sheets and guidelines specifically targeted at those who may come into direct contact with bats – those who find a grounded or injured bats, vets, bat workers and carers. We have also produced a fact sheet targeting fishermen who occasionally may catch bats in their fishing lines.

2. Why wear gloves when handling bats?

BCT is aware that some bat workers feel we are being over cautious and that wearing gloves sends out the “wrong” message to the general public. The idea of this document is to outline the reasons why we take this approach. It is laid out in the form of comments we have received from bat workers regarding BCT's policy on the wearing of gloves.

Comment: The risk from rabies is so small that wearing gloves is not necessary

- Since 1977 there have been five human deaths in Europe (three confirmed, two possible) from infection with European Bat Lyssavirus (EBLV), a type of rabies virus that occurs in two forms (EBLV1 and EBLV2). In all cases the human had been bitten or scratched by bats and had not received rabies vaccinations either before or after being bitten by bats.
- These cases included the tragic death of a Scottish bat worker, from EBLV2 in 2002.

- As of June 2018 only 16 infections with EBLV2 have been confirmed in UK bats. Of these cases, 15 were confirmed through the passive surveillance programme run by the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA). The other case was confirmed through active surveillance, which involved taking blood and saliva samples from wild populations.
- Bat rabies viruses have been found in several species in the rest of Europe including serotine, Natterer's bat (indeed antibodies to EBLV1, but not the live virus, have been found in these two species in the UK), common pipistrelle, Brandt's bat, common bent-winged bat, and other species.
- In 2008, an active surveillance programme of Daubenton's bats in Scotland reported that 3% of Daubenton's bats tested were positive for EBLV2 antibodies; in addition the live EBLV2 virus was detected in a single individual. The study also found two Natterer's bats that tested positive for EBLV1 antibodies. This work showed that a relatively small percentage of the bats sampled had antibodies to EBLV.
- It is clear, therefore, that UK bats can carry a rabies virus. What we don't currently know is the scale of the risk. It is almost certainly a very small risk but we don't know what the infection rate is in bats, or how many species may be affected.

Comment: Wearing gloves gives out the "wrong" message to the general public

- We need to think carefully about what message we are trying to give out to the general public.
- We also need to remember how much we rely on public support for what we do. So far we have not had a violent anti-bat reaction, despite the fact that a rabies virus has been found in bats in the UK and the tragic death of a Scottish bat worker. However, that could easily change, especially if a member of the public died of rabies following a bite from a bat. The risk of that happening is small but, given the nature of the disease, it is one we cannot ignore.
- Everyone who calls the BCT Helpline with an injured or grounded bat query is warned that there is a small risk that some bats carry a rabies virus and that they should use gloves or some other form of protection if they handle the animal. Information about the rabies risk is given in a non-alarmist way. Very few people change their attitude to bats after hearing about the rabies risk - those who have a negative opinion of bats are at least pleased to have been given the information.
- This is not just about rabies; it is about people's perceptions of wild animals in general. It is wise to be wary when approaching or handling **any** wild animal; it might be in pain or distress and as a consequence it might bite. Of course bats are appealing animals and we want the public to feel empathy towards them but they are still wild animals and need to be treated as such.

- If a member of the public sees a bat worker wearing gloves when handling bats they are more likely to do the same if they came across a stranded bat or to leave it for someone else to deal with; either way the risk of being bitten is minimised.

Comment: The whole issue is being blown out of proportion

- BCT has to look at the wider picture. We have collaborated fully with all relevant government agencies to try to ensure the response to the rabies risk in bats is proportionate to the scale of that risk. Following the sad death of a Scottish bat worker there was a risk that there might be calls for the culling of bats. Thankfully, that never happened but that does not mean we can assume that there will be no such call in the future, particularly if there is another rabies incident. It is important for the future of bat conservation that we are seen to be making every effort to ensure the risk to humans is minimised.
- The sensible approach is for bat workers to ensure any risk from rabies is minimised through wearing gloves.

Comment: I am already vaccinated so it doesn't matter if I am bitten

- Each time you are bitten, you should investigate with your GP whether you should have post-exposure treatment, even if you have already been vaccinated. It is unwise to receive more boosters or post-exposure treatment than is necessary. Wearing gloves when at risk of being bitten greatly reduces your chances of having to have post-exposure treatment.

Comment: Some scientific procedures, such as getting bats out of a mist net or taking measurements, are difficult when wearing gloves.

- With practice and the right type of gloves these tasks become easier. Some people may find it easier to use one glove rather than two.

What gloves should I wear for bat handling?

- Please see section 3 below with details of suitable gloves and suggestions relating to the types of gloves for handling different bat species.

3. Gloves for handling bats

There is no single type of glove suitable for handling the whole range of UK bat species. For instance, the type of glove one would use for picking up a noctule from the ground and placing it on a tree trunk would be very different from the sort needed to administer first aid to a pipistrelle. BCT has spoken to a number of expert bat handlers and the Statutory Nature Conservation Organisations; below are details of some gloves that bat workers may find suitable. **Please note:** BCT has not tested any of these gloves, the list below is made up of recommendations from experienced bat workers.

Updated June 2018

The purpose of wearing gloves is to reduce the chance of getting bitten. All who regularly handle bats should be fully vaccinated against rabies. In the event that you are bitten, wash the wound at once, gently but thoroughly, with soap and water and speak immediately to your GP to discuss post-exposure treatment. This applies even when you are fully vaccinated against rabies.

There are no definite rules for not getting bitten if you handle bats. A lot comes down to what works for you. If just picking up a grounded bat for release, use thick leather gloves. When handling for other reasons you may wish to use thinner gloves such as those detailed below. You may also want to wear a thicker glove on the hand holding the bat (the hand most likely to get bitten) and a thinner glove on the hand used for examining wings, measuring etc. All bats can bite through surgical type gloves though these are good for preventing bat saliva reaching the handler's skin. Depending upon the reason for handling, you may need to use different gloves for each bat to avoid saliva being passed from bat to bat. Take care when removing your gloves not to get saliva onto your skin. Also consider giving the bat something to bite on which should take its attention away from your hand.

3.1 Glove Suppliers

Please note: as stated above BCT has not tested any of these gloves, the list below is made up of recommendations from experienced bat workers.

Thick leather gloves

- Thick leather gloves are available online and from most garden centres, prices vary. One example is Briers lined gardening gloves available online at: <https://www.briersltd.co.uk/products/lined-hide-gloves> in sizes small, medium and large for about £16.

Thinner leather gloves

- RAF flying gloves, available from TransAir <https://www.flightstore.co.uk/>, Silvermans <https://www.silvermans.co.uk/> and other suppliers (search online), sizes 7-10.5, super thin gloves, capeskin leather, elasticated wrist, cost approx. £45 - £60. These don't wash well but are quite good for sensitivity. [We have previously listed Pilot Warehouse as suppliers of these gloves but have received reports of issues with orders from them not arriving.]
- Leather horse-riding gloves, likely to be slightly thicker leather than the flying gloves, purchase from tack shops, prices vary, e.g. The Saddlery Shop, <http://www.thesaddleryshop.co.uk/>, adult plain leather horse riding gloves, sizes 7.5-9, cost: approx £10 upwards.
- Leather driving gloves, and women's leather gloves, available from a number of retailers, cost approx. £15-40, from Marks & Spencer, <http://www.marksandspencer.com> and cost approx. £20-55, from John Lewis, <http://www.johnlewis.com>.

Bear in mind that leather gloves tend not to wash well – they may go quite stiff for a while afterwards. It would be best to wash them by hand.

Other gloves

- Showa 265 Nitrile Lite Palm Fit Gloves (14G2400) from Arco, <http://www.arco.co.uk>. Sizes 6, 7, 8, 9, fabric gloves with thin rubber coated palm and fingers, cost per pair is approx. £5. Showa Grip Lite gloves are also available from NHBS, www.nhbs.com and Wildcare, <https://www.wildcareshop.com/> cost approx. £4-£6.
- Turtleskin such as CP Insider 330, available direct from Turtleskin at: <http://www.turtleskin.co.uk/> these gloves are thin but puncture resistant, approx. £27 per pair.
- Light and Grip by Roeckl are available from tack shops and various online retailers. Made of polyurethane, you could wash these while wearing them. Cost is approx. £30. They come in half sizes.
- Ansell HyFlex cut protection range, available from Arco, <http://www.arco.co.uk>, Screwfix <http://www.screwfix.com> and other retailers for around £12 to £20 a pair.
- Thin cotton gloves are available from Boots the Chemist, branches in most areas, <http://www.boots.com>, cost approx £3. Hand-wash only. May be suitable for handling tame captives for show but they can be bitten through so are not suitable for other bat handling purposes.

3.2 Suggested Types of Gloves by Bat Species and Type of Handling

Species of bat	Type of handling required	Suggested type of glove*
<i>Large bats, e.g.</i> noctule, serotine, greater horseshoe bat, Leisler's bat.	Minimal handling (e.g. placing in a box, placing on vertical surface for take-off).	Thick leather gloves
As above.	Examination, measuring, sexing, weighing, etc.	Thick leather glove on hand most likely to be bitten, thinner leather glove on “examining” hand. Consider wearing surgical type gloves underneath.
As above but where bat is used to being handled and is calm.	To administer first aid.	Thinner leather gloves. Consider wearing surgical type gloves underneath.
<i>Medium sized bats, e.g.</i> long-eared bats, barbastelle, Daubenton's bat, Bechstein's bat, and Natterer's bat.	Minimal handling (e.g. placing in a box, placing on vertical surface for take-off).	Thick leather gloves.

Species of bat	Type of handling required	Suggested type of glove*
As above.	Examination, measuring, sexing, weighing, etc.	Thinner leather gloves. Consider wearing surgical type gloves underneath.
As above but where bat is used to being handled and is calm.	To administer first aid.	Showa Grip Lite or similar, consider wearing surgical type gloves underneath.
<i>Small bats, e.g.</i> pipistrelles, whiskered bat, alcahoie bat and Brandt's bat.	Minimal handling (e.g. placing in a box, placing on vertical surface for take-off).	Thinner leather gloves, Showa Grip Lite or similar.
As above.	Examination, measuring, sexing, weighing, etc.	Showa Grip Lite or similar.
As above but where bat used to being handled and is calm.	To administer first aid.	Showa Grip Lite or similar.

*Remember that large bats like noctules, greater horseshoe bats or serotines can bite through most things. You will need to decide on what sort of gloves to wear/techniques to use, which will depend on what you are doing with the bat, as well as its behaviour.

Our thanks go to bat workers for their contributions and suggestions.