

Bat Crime

An update on the Bat Conservation Trust's investigations project, by investigations officer Alison Rasey.

What do the following locations have in common?

Airth (Scotland)
Sefton (England)
Chryston (Scotland)
Canterbury (England)
Pendine (Wales)

The answer is they are all places where bat-related crime incidents have been investigated by the police or RSPCA, and received penalties since March this year. And (surprise, surprise) four of the five are connected with the building development or building maintenance sector...but more on them later.

Bat-related crime incidents are still occurring all too often and, here at BCT, we believe the number of incidents we hear about are but a drop in the ocean. BCT has recently published its latest bat-related crime report, which summarises the current situation. It reveals that 170 incidents were notified to BCT between July 2004 and April 2007 and there were five successful prosecutions within that time, with fines totalling £3,400. When one remembers that fines can reach up to £5,000 per incident, £5,000 per bat, or up to six months in prison, it becomes clear that fines really need to be increased if they are to act as a deterrent. Sadly, it is often more cost effective for developers to break the law than to engage the services of an ecological consultant and get things done correctly. So we need to champion more those developers that DO get things right and work harder to get negative publicity for those that do it wrong.

There are no prizes for guessing who the biggest perpetrators of bat-related incidents are – 66% of incidents in this reporting period occurred in the building and development/building maintenance sector. This is perhaps unsurprising since most bat species are regularly found roosting in buildings. Their destruction is also probably more visible than other forms of roost destruction and therefore more likely to be notified to BCT or the police. What is depressing, however, is that many of these incidents take place even though either it is known that a bat roost is present, or the signs of a bat roost are clearly visible to those undertaking the work. Whether the perpetrators think they can just 'get away with it' or whether they truly do not realise that bat roosts are protected is not entirely clear but, either way, education is key and appropriate prosecution does help to get

the message across.

In an earlier edition of *Bat News* we reported that Kelvin Jones had taken up a one-year post with the National Wildlife Crime Unit as the Operation Bat Project Officer. Although not all incidents are processed with a view to getting a prosecution, as Kelvin says: *"The law is there for a reason, and that reason is to protect these very vulnerable animals. We would always much rather prevent damaging incidents from happening in the first place, than have to enforce the law by taking prosecutions forward. Timely intervention and education will always be our first choice. However, for repeat offenders and those who have a blatant disregard for wildlife legislation, prosecution may be our only option."*



© Shirley Thompson

Inspecting droppings inside a house

Now back to the incidents I mentioned at the beginning of this article (which have all been concluded since the bat crime report was produced):-

Airth: The incident at Airth occurred in autumn 2006, and involved a demolition company intentionally damaging pipistrelle roosts. A digger driver continued to strip out the interior of a building even though bats were flying out at the time. Penalty for the demolition company: £2,000 fine.

Sefton: This incident involved a barn conversion and a brown long-eared roost; the planning applicant had been informed that bats were present, but he had apparently delegated responsibility to his builder who, although knowing about the roost, replaced the roof in the autumn of 2006, destroying the roost in the process. Penalties for both involved: total fines and costs amounted to £1,750.

Chryston: This involved a bat roost already known to SNH and the homeowner, with signs of use clearly visible in the form of droppings and urine streaks on one of the windows of the property. A builder undertook works to the roof during August 2006, despite bats being present at the time. Penalty for the builder: £300 fine.

Canterbury: In November 2006 in Canterbury a youth was seen throwing a live pipistrelle into the air and kicking it. The bat died soon afterwards. The boy admitted causing unnecessary suffering to the bat and magistrates gave him a three-month referral order and ordered him to pay £43 costs.

Pendine: In November 2006, buildings were demolished containing known roosts of pipistrelle and brown long-eared bats. A Habitats Regulations licence had been applied for but demolition went ahead before it was determined. Penalty for the individual who carried out the demolition: a £1,000 fine plus costs of £500.

So, bat-related crime continues; although we know from anecdotal evidence that the extent is much larger than our statistics show, recording these incidents does give us an indication as to where our efforts in educating and awareness raising (and effective prosecutions which are very time consuming) should be focussed. The incidents listed above have reached court because of excellent partnership working between the bat world, the police, RSPCA and SNCOs. BCT thanks all those involved for progressing these cases.

BCT's latest bat-related crime report can be downloaded at www.bats.org.uk – click on Bats and the Law to see the report.

BCT is extremely grateful for the support that bat groups and bat workers have provided for the BCT's Investigations Project. Please continue to support it if you can, and do notify me or Kelvin of incidents you hear about.
Alison Rasey: investigations@bats.org.uk or arasey@bats.org.uk
Tel: 020 7501 3631.
Kelvin Jones:
Kelvin.jones@nwcu.pnn.police.uk
Tel: 07917 599690.