

# Bat and Bird Boxes

The main function of bat boxes is to provide alternative safe roosting sites for groups of bats where natural sites are unavailable or become unavailable. Although such roost provision is beneficial for bats, it should be pointed out that bat boxes can never replace a hollow tree or building roost. To encourage bats to use bat boxes, it is very important to site them carefully (more info on this is available on the Wildlife section of [www.heritagecouncil.ie](http://www.heritagecouncil.ie)).

If birds are present in a building in which you plan to carry out works, then there may be an opportunity to incorporate “accommodation” for them into the design through the use of nest boxes. Most species that use buildings, especially hole or cavity nesting species will readily take to nest boxes. Swift colonies are very susceptible to habitat loss from building renovations, yet it is easy to design such renovations to allow swifts to nest in the buildings by providing appropriate nesting boxes.



House sparrow nest box on the side of a house. (Birdwatch Ireland)



Different styles of bat boxes all painted black to absorb more heat from the sun thereby keeping the bats warm. (Tina Aughney)

## Useful Information and Contacts

### National Parks and Wildlife Service

For any queries in relation to the law on bats, bats in your house or if you are planning building works and think that they might affect bats contact the NPWS Bat Helpline on freephone: **1800 405 000**.

For queries relating to birds contact your local **NPWS** Conservation Ranger through **NPWS**, 7, Ely Place, Dublin 2, Tel: +353 (0)1-888-2000; Web: [www.npws.ie](http://www.npws.ie). (The NPWS publication: *Bats in Houses* can be found on the website.)

### Bat Conservation Ireland (BCI)

Contact BCI for advice on bats. The website [www.batconservationireland.org](http://www.batconservationireland.org) includes a searchable database of known bat species in each county, publications, and their newsletter ‘*The Natterer*’.

### Cork County Bat Group

Phone 021-7339247 or visit [www.corkcountybatgroup.ie](http://www.corkcountybatgroup.ie). Their website has a video demonstration on how to remove a bat which has strayed into living quarters.

**BirdWatch Ireland:** For advice on birds including legislation and practical matters such as nest boxes, bird identification etc: **BirdWatch Ireland**, P.O. Box 12, Greystones, Co. Wicklow, Tel: +353 (0)1-281-9878; Web: [www.birdwatchireland.ie](http://www.birdwatchireland.ie)

### If you find a sick or injured Bird

If you find a sick or injured bird, contact the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ISPCA) on 043-33-25035 or your local SPCA (check a local phonebook for details). Alternatively, a local veterinary surgeon may be able to help.

### Heritage Council Publications available on the Wildlife section of its website <http://www.heritagecouncil.ie/wildlife/>:

- *Bat Survey Guidelines: Traditional Farm Buildings Scheme*
- *Conserving Bats – How Local Authorities Can Help*
- *Biodiversity, the Law and You: a leaflet that informs you of the laws protecting biodiversity.*
- *Conserving and Enhancing Wildlife in Towns and Villages: A Guide for Local Community Groups*
- *Conserving Hedgerows*

*The Wildlife section of the website also contains further information on bats and birds in buildings relative to this publication including tables showing the feeding, roosting and nesting habits of different bird and bats species and a diagram identifying the locations within a dwelling house where bats like to roost.*

For more information, please contact the Heritage Council Wildlife Officer.

Text written by Tina Aughney, Alex Copland and Oonagh Duggan.

*Cover photo: A family home at the Green, Ramelton, Co. Donegal. Houses similar to this one can often provide roosting and nesting sites for bats and birds. (Colm Murray)*

*Cover Inset: Barn Owl. (John Lusby)*

*Background Photos: Newpark March, Co. Kilkenny (Oonagh Duggan) Hall House, Co. Kilkenny (Oonagh Duggan)*

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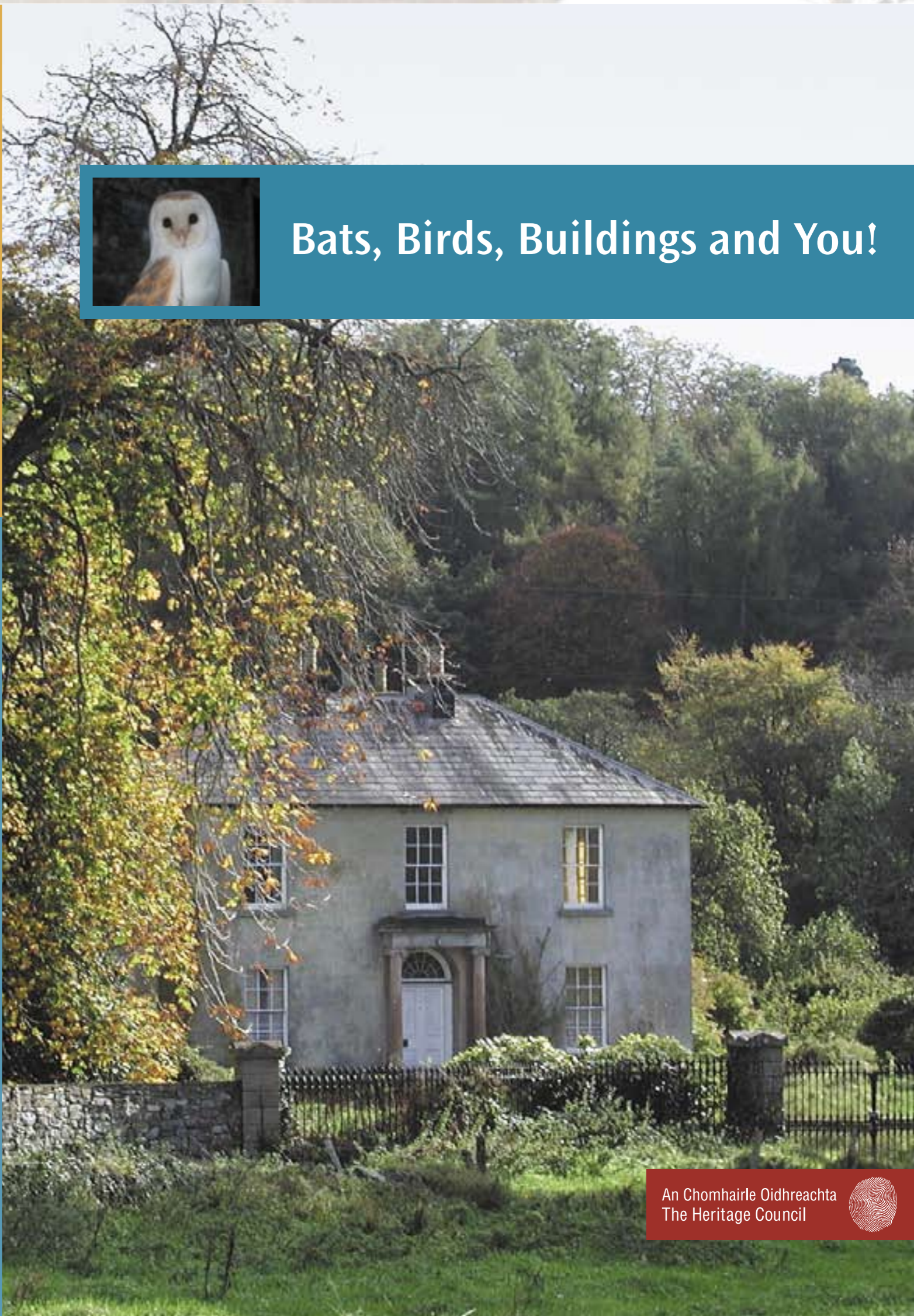
Áras na hOidhreachta  
Church Lane, Kilkenny, Ireland

T 056 777 0777  
F 056 777 0788

E [mail@heritagecouncil.ie](mailto:mail@heritagecouncil.ie)  
[www.heritagecouncil.ie](http://www.heritagecouncil.ie)



## Bats, Birds, Buildings and You!



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# Biodiversity in our Buildings!

Do you notice when the first swallow arrives in the Spring after its long migration from Africa? Did you know that a single pipistrelle bat can eat around 3000 midges in a night? Or that the numbers of barn owl (the Late Late Show bird) once common in Ireland, could be as low as 300 pairs? So what do these species have in common?

...They often make their homes in buildings such as dwelling houses, old farm buildings, old churches, outhouses and sheds.

The birds and bats of Ireland are an important part of our biodiversity and our natural heritage. They provide important services for the wider environment and for people, and aid in countryside management. Bats are very beneficial to us as they eat thousands of the biting insects that are 'nuisances' to humans and livestock. Birds help to control garden and farmland pests (such as rodents) and weeds, and spread seeds.

Many of our birds and all of our bats species are vulnerable to human interference and if they nest or roost in a building, they can be harmed by any renovation or restoration works to it. All bats and birds, their nests and roosts, and their eggs and young have legal protection in Ireland. Therefore, it is important that we are aware of the habits of these animals and what can cause them harm, that we understand the laws protecting them, learn how we can co-exist with them in our buildings, enjoy their comings and goings, and even attract them into our spaces. This is the aim of this publication. Building owners are the guardians of many bats and nesting birds. This publication is not intended to be exhaustive guidance if you are planning works on your building, but to deepen our understanding of how important buildings are for bats and birds.

## Birds Nesting

Birds can use all types of structures for nesting, from stone ruins to modern concrete buildings and from large industrial complexes to small garden sheds. Many bird species have come to rely on buildings to provide them with nesting habitats as a result of changes to our countryside. Perhaps the best known of these is the Swallow, but others include the Barn Owl, House Martin and House Sparrow.

Most birds prefer quiet and undisturbed buildings for nesting. Old stone ruins, such as castles, old houses or even churches, can provide them with holes and crevices in which to nest. Buildings that are covered with ivy or other creepers offer even more cover for nesting birds. However, birds will also use buildings that are in everyday use. Many, such as House Martins, build or access their nests on the outside of buildings, but a few, such as Swallow, actually take up residence inside buildings. Some birds, such as Starling or Pied Wagtail, will take advantage of the warmer air in the middle of cities and use buildings to roost during winter. Even small wooden sheds or walls can be occupied by a Wren or a Robin looking for a nest site in a sheltered spot, safe from the weather. Generations of Swallows can use the same building to nest in for several years.



*Mistle Thrush nesting on exterior light of a modern building. (Neil van Dokkum)*

## Bats Roosting

Trees, caves, old buildings and cellars were once the traditional roosting sites for bats but since these are less available now, bats are being forced to use any kind of building. All buildings, in particular, the walls, eaves and roofs are potential roosting sites. Bats like clean and draught-free buildings, without dust or cobwebs and normally conceal themselves in crevices, behind roofing felt, in wall cavities or under ridge tiles. They don't bring in nesting materials and will not gnaw wood or electric cables.



*Brown long-eared bats roosting inside a wall. (Conor Kelleher)*

## Bat Species in Ireland

### We have 10 species of bats in Ireland:

Soprano pipistrelle and common pipistrelle are our smallest bats (they will fit on the end of your thumb) and are the species most usually found in houses. They favour roosting at the gable ends, above soffits, at the top of cavity walls, near chimneys and behind bargeboards. They also roost under ridge tiles and under roofing felt.

Brown long-eared bat is the next most commonly found species in buildings though it prefers large roof spaces. This species is often clearly visible in the roof hanging from the ridge beam.

Leisler's bat, our largest bat, would fit in the palm of your hand; it is rarely found in the rest of Europe but is widespread in Ireland. It is often found in house eaves and trees.

Lesser horseshoe bat is our most protected bat and hangs freely up-side down with the wings wrapped around the body and often looks like hanging plums.

Whiskered, Brandt's, Natterer's and Daubenton's bats are similar in appearance and are occasionally found in the roof spaces of houses, crevices in stonework and brick work and along ridge beams.

Nathusius' pipistrelle is a rare species and its habits are similar to the more common pipistrelles.

To see county maps showing the distribution of bat species in Ireland, visit Bat Conservation Ireland's website, [www.batconservationireland.org](http://www.batconservationireland.org)

## Barn Owl

Barn Owls typically use large, old stone buildings, where they nest in cavities in the chimney or wall, all year round, and therefore can be adversely affected by renovation works at any time of the year. Any building that offers a suitably large cavity, including modern metal and concrete structures, or even single-storey cottages with a roof-space or intact chimney-breast, can be occupied. Whenever a building is being renovated, checking for the presence of Barn Owls (pellets, droppings-also known as whitewash, and feathers) should be undertaken as a matter of course. Barn owls are 'red-listed' in Ireland: this means that, due to steep population declines, they are of 'high conservation concern' according to BirdWatch Ireland. Over 90% of the estimated 300 pairs in existence in Ireland nest in old buildings. There may be several reasons for the population decline, but the loss or renovation of once suitable buildings has been identified as a contributory factor. If you find any signs of Barn Owls, contact BirdWatch Ireland for advice (see contact info on the back page).



*Barn Owl. (John Lusby)*

# Understanding Bats

Due to the decline of bats across Europe and their important role in the web of life, the conservation of Ireland's bat populations is very important. But bats in Ireland are often misunderstood due to their association with Hallowe'en and horror movies. They pose no threat to humans and will not get stuck in your hair!

They usually only come out at night to feed and often go largely un-noticed by people. They tend to be found in areas near water and copses of trees or woodland as this is where they find insects. Bats are mammals like us (they are not rodents) and only give birth to a single baby in any year. They may form colonies or roost alone or in small groups and have different roosting requirements according to the seasons, the species and their sex or age. As a result bat roosts may not be occupied for the whole year round as bats move when their needs change, but they do return to the same roost every year.

The largest colonies of bats tend to be found during the summer months when females congregate in maternity roosts. If these roosts are damaged or interfered with, with the babies inside, it could wipe out the population for the following year. In wintertime when bats go into hibernation their metabolism slows down dramatically. If their wintertime roost is disturbed



Leisler's bat resting on the gloved hand of a bat specialist. (Tina Aughney)

or damaged it can take them 30-40 minutes to rouse from hibernation status: this may be too slow to escape injury or death from building works. Since bats produce so few young, and their survival depends on many different factors, their populations are vulnerable to changes in their environment.

# Other Essential Requirements for Bats and Birds

In addition to the building itself, sympathetic management of the local countryside or garden is crucial for birds, bats and other wildlife. Both bats and birds need trees and hedges for the insects and shelter they provide. In the garden, planting of suitable plant, shrub and tree species (especially berry-bearing native stock species for birds) and feeding birds in the winter is very beneficial. Encourage bats into your garden by planting native stock night-scented plants, creating a wet area, avoiding the use of pesticides and making a compost heap. In the farmed landscape, hedgerows, woodlands and wetlands sustain bird and bat populations as they provide them with



Farm buildings surrounded by trees, hedgerows and other plants. This vegetation is essential for bats and birds for feeding and concealment. (Anna Meenan)

food and water. Bats don't like to fly in open areas and use the concealment of a treeline to get to their feeding areas. Even in urban areas, green spaces in retail or business parks or a school playground can be managed to benefit wildlife through sensitive planting of appropriate species to provide food and shelter.

# Living with Bats and Birds

Here are some tips if you have bats and/or birds in your house:

- Cover your water tank to prevent bats from accidentally drowning and contaminating your water.
- Place a polythene sheet on the attic floor if bat droppings accumulate and gather up at the end of the season (use on your flower beds or compost).
- Ensure that the attic door is closed to prevent bats flying into the living space of the building.
- Sometimes birds fly into windows and may be killed or injured. If this happens regularly, a silhouette in the shape of a bird of prey may deter birds from striking window-panes.



The Common Swift often nests inside buildings. (Artur Tabor)

If you find a Bat or Bird in your Living Area:

- Close the door of the room in which the bat or bird is seen and open any windows, open any curtains and turn off the light. This allows a flying bat/bird a means of remaining calm and a chance to escape. Never chase a flying bat/bird as this only makes it panic and prolongs the situation.
- Bats or birds should be watched until they come to rest (often bats will rest in the pleats of curtains).
- **For Birds:** try to corner the bird and catch it using a hand-net or light sheet. Once captured the bird can be set free. Note that birds, particularly small ones, are very delicate and care should be taken when handling them.
- **For Bats:** to avoid being nipped use gloves, or a towel to remove the bat and carry it outside. Place it high, at arms reach, on a wall or tree. This should allow the bat to regain flight. Some bats take their time so keep a watch on the animal for 15 minutes and if it fails to fly then recapture it and contact the local Bat Group for further advice.
- See Further Information on the back page about the Cork County Bat Group online video showing how to remove a bat from your living area.

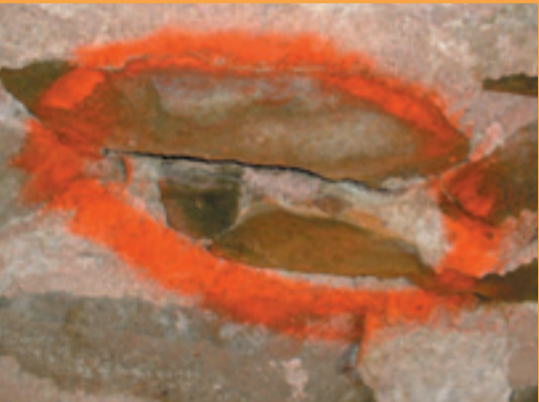


Swallow chicks in their mud nest cup attached to the inside walls of a farm building. (Stefanie Fleischer)

# Building Works and Impacts on Bats and Birds

Building works including repair, restoration and renovation works (e.g. re-roofing, re-tiling, re-pointing, timber treatment) can detrimentally harm bats, bat roosts, and nesting birds, all of which are protected by law. It is therefore very important to establish if your building contains bats at the earliest possible stage so that any proposed works that you wish to carry out do not harm these animals or their roost/nest sites.

If you think that you have bats or nesting birds in the building then you should contact the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) before any works are undertaken, otherwise, you may intentionally or unintentionally commit an offence. With regard to bats, NPWS may state that you need a derogation licence with conditions on the works that must be adhered to. These conditions are based on the type of bats present, how they use the building and the type of works you are undertaking e.g. you may have to avoid doing works during the summer months or that you use bat-friendly chemicals. Check out the Law section below and contact NPWS for a full statement of the law.



The red spray paint highlights a bat roosting site between stonework which has been marked for retention during infilling operations so that it will remain open for the use of bats after works are complete. (Conor Kelleher)

# Overview of Laws Protecting Bats and Nesting Birds.

## The Law on Nesting Birds

All birds, nests, eggs and nestlings are fully protected under law in Ireland Wildlife Act (1976) as amended 2000. Wilful destruction of an active nest (from the building stage until the chicks have fledged) is an offence, unless the nest is located in a building occupied by people (in which case, the nest is only protected when there are eggs or chicks present). If work is being undertaken on a building, and an active nest is found, a National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) Conservation Ranger should be contacted immediately for advice. Any further work that results in the destruction of the nest is therefore an offence.

## The Law on Bats

All bats and their roosts are strictly protected in Ireland under the EU Habitats Directive without exception. They are also protected under the Irish Wildlife Act (1976) as amended in 2000. Since bats are known to occupy buildings, all buildings and, in particular, their walls, eaves and roofs are potential roosting sites. Under these laws, it is an offence to intentionally kill, disturb, handle, sell or offer for sale any bat, without a licence. It is also an offence to disturb a bat roost (even if the bats are absent). If you do have bats or a bat roost in your building and are planning works, you should contact your local NPWS Conservation Ranger or the Bat Helpline (1800 405 000) immediately.

*Destruction, alteration or deliberate exclusion of bats from a known bat roost is an offence under current legislation; contact NPWS to find out if a derogation license is required to carry out works.*

Contact the NPWS for specific information on the laws protecting bats and birds. See back page for contacts.

*A swallow incubates eggs in a nest built in the corner of a house. Alongside, a wren feeds its chicks in a disused swallow's nest. The wren modified the swallow's old mud cup-like nest with moss for its own use. (Mike Brown)*



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# How do I know if there are Bats in a Building?

Remember bats may use your home in the summer but not in the autumn, so April-August may be the best time to check. The Wildlife section of the Heritage Council website ([www.heritagecouncil.ie](http://www.heritagecouncil.ie)) has additional information on the locations within a house where bats often roost.



A lesser horseshoe bat hanging from a beam in an attic. (Mike Brown)

1. Check the outside of the building for any bat droppings on window-panes and sills, on exterior walls of the house or on the ground next to the building. The location of droppings will indicate where bats are exiting the building. Their droppings are dark brown or black and between 4-8mm in length. Unlike a mouse dropping, a bat dropping will crumble to a fine powder if pressed. They can also be found on exterior walls and windows beneath the entry and exit holes.
2. At dusk, position yourself and 3 other people at the four corners of the house. Be in position 30 minutes after sunset and watch for bats exiting the building. Note the exit points (don't cover these up, it is illegal to do so).
3. If the attic space is accessible, check for bat droppings and visible bats and take note of where you see any evidence. Also look for moth and beetle wings in little piles, attic areas free of spider webs and staining on wood or walls from their urine.
4. To identify the points bats use to enter the building check for bats at dawn. You may see them swarming around the building 30 minutes before sunrise after they have spent the night feeding.



Bats, especially pipistrelles, often roost in modern houses such as this one. (Tina Aughney)

*Please be aware that checking the building yourself does not relieve you of your obligations under the laws protecting bats and birds, nor does it take the place of a survey by a specialist, so if in any doubt, seek advice.*

# Checking for Nesting Birds

The general activity of birds around a building provides the best indication of whether there may be an active nest site inside. If you use a building regularly the presence of birds may be well known to you. Follow these steps to check for nesting birds (See the Wildlife section of the Heritage Council website for a table showing the nesting habits for birds which commonly use buildings.):

- Find a vantage spot several metres away from the building and watch for any birds entering or exiting the building itself, or any part of the external wall (where birds may be using holes). This may need to be done from several locations to ensure that all walls and points of access to or from a building can be seen. Be sure to look out for birds carrying anything in their bills (such as nesting material or food) as that might indicate an active nest nearby.
- When approaching the building, observe if any birds fly out. Birds may fly off nests when you are at some distance, while others will remain sitting tight even when someone is within a few inches. Listen for any birds making alarm calls (usually short, harsh chacking calls) as this may indicate a nearby nest.
- Check for any staining on the walls by bird droppings.
- The presence of a nest does not necessarily mean that it is currently in use. Old nests will often look dishevelled, with the nest cup containing old leaves or other detritus. Birds often return to the same nest year after year.
- If you see eggs in a nest it is more than likely a 'live' nest and should not be disturbed. Don't touch the eggs.



Starling nest hole in a stone wall of a building. The 'whitewash' (droppings) below it indicates that a starling is occupying this hole. (Birdwatch Ireland)

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Áras na hOidhreachta  
Church Lane, Kilkenny, Ireland

T 056 777 0777  
F 056 777 0788

E mail@heritagecouncil.ie  
[www.heritagecouncil.ie](http://www.heritagecouncil.ie)

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