

IRISH BATS

Bats are **mammals** just like us, which means they are warm blooded and give birth to live young. They also have fur covered bodies to keep them warm. Females only have one baby at a time and feed their newborn babies milk. Bats are unique because they are the only mammal that is capable of powered flight. A bat's wing is actually its hands, but they are webbed with a thin membrane of skin stretched between each elongated finger, with a small claw-like thumb that they use for climbing.



In Ireland we have nine **resident** species of bat. You may have heard of the old saying “as blind as a bat” but bats are not actually blind and their eyesight is as good, if not better than our own. They don't rely on their eyes to hunt though; they use **echolocation** to find their way around in the dark and to catch prey to eat. All the bats in Ireland are **insectivorous**. They hunt at night for midges, moths and other **nocturnal** flying . Bats catch their prey on the wing (as they are flying), they are very acrobatic flyers, capable of swift changes in direction allowing them to be very effective hunters, with some bat species catching up to 3,500 midges a night.

Irish bats are active in late spring and early summer. In spring the bats leave their roost each night at dusk and go out to catch insects, as the temperature warms up they spend more time out hunting each night. In summer the females gather into a nursery or **maternity roost** known as a **colony**. The females will select a roost that is warm, near good insect habitats and places where they will be left alone. In late June the females begin to give birth. They only have a single baby that is called a pup, which the mother can identify by its smell and sound. The pups feed on the mother's milk for 6-7 weeks until they are **weaned**. Each night the mothers leave their babies in the nursery for short periods while they go hunting. Pups are vulnerable at birth; they are born blind and hairless, weighing a third of its mother's weight. Mothers rarely ever carry the pup outside the nursery roost. The only time this might happen is if they have been disturbed and need to move to another roost to keep the pup safe.



After several weeks the young pup will learn how to fly and echolocate, by which time they become **independent**. The bats then spend the rest of the summer fattening up to survive the cold winter nights. In mid-August the females find suitable males to breed with. As the temperatures drop and the number of insects naturally decline the males and females move to a **hibernation** roost. During hibernation a bat uses very little energy and its body temperature drops to as little as 8-9°C. They will stay this way all winter, but sometimes you might see a bat flying around during this time. This bat has probably been disturbed and been woken from their sleep. These bats will look for some food before going back to sleep and only awake in late spring.

KEY DEFINITIONS

Mammals: are animals that suckle their young on milk.

Resident: animals that do not migrate and remain in a place year round.

Echolocation: emitting very high pitched sounds and creating an image of their surroundings by listening for the echoes that bounce off obstacles in the environment. Echolocation is used for moving around and hunting for prey.

Insectivorous: a diet that consists of insects.

Nocturnal: a species that is active at night.

Maternity roost: where bats and their young gather to rest in the day.

Colony: a community of animals of the same species living close together.

Independent: not depending on its parents for food or shelter.

Weaned: when a baby no longer requires its mother's milk, instead it eats more solid food.

Hibernation: an extended period of remaining inactive or indoors.

QUIZ SHEET

1. How many bat species are resident in Ireland?

2. Are bats blind? (True or False)

3. What do pups feed on?

4. When do bats give birth?

5. How many pups do bats give birth to each year?

6. When are pups weaned?

7. How do bats locate their prey?

8. What kind of diet do bats have?

9. What is the name of the place bats move to for winter?

10. When do bats come out to feed?
