



Wildlife in Buildings

Linking our built and natural heritage

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Comhairle Contae Chiarraí
Kerry County Council



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An Roinn Tithíochta,
Rialtais Aitiúil agus Oidhreachta
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Introduction

Why have we produced these guidelines?

Our built heritage and our natural heritage are inextricably linked. For as long as we have created structures for our protection and shelter, wildlife has moved in for the very same reasons. Expansion of the modern built environment has a negative effect on biodiversity but also creates opportunities for certain wildlife. From the diverse range of birds and mammals which have colonised abandoned ruins in remote rural landscapes, to wildlife which has moved into suburban and urban areas to live alongside us and even share our homes, buildings have become an integral component of the Irish landscape for biodiversity.

Given the importance of buildings for wildlife, changes to the built environment can affect wildlife associated with it. The loss of old stone structures due to demolition, dilapidation or renovation is linked to declines in species such as Barn Owl and Swift. Modern buildings do not provide the same opportunities for wildlife and changes to existing buildings can impact wildlife which use these structures. Conflict between people and wildlife in buildings is commonplace, but it is always preventable. When problems occur, it is typically wildlife which suffers. This is usually caused by lack of awareness of their presence, or a lack of understanding of how to undertake works on a building in a way that minimises disturbance to wildlife, and takes account of the legislative requirements concerning the protection of wildlife. We have produced these guidelines to provide clear and concise information on these topics, and in doing so hope to increase awareness of the importance of buildings for wildlife and to improve the conservation of wildlife in the built environment. Some of our most iconic and most vulnerable wildlife are reliant on buildings for their survival. We also provide guidance on improving buildings for wildlife, to ensure that as the built environment constantly changes and expands, we continue to make space for nature.



Starlings gather before going to roost on buildings in a city centre

Who is this document for?

This document is for anyone who wants to know more about the importance of buildings for wildlife and should be useful for building owners, those responsible for maintenance of buildings, those who provide advice relating to renovations and new-builds, and those who want to improve their buildings for wildlife. The advice in this booklet is useful for farmers and home owners, as well as designers, planners, architects, engineers, construction workers, local authorities, Heritage Officers, archaeologists and ecologists.

What is in this document?

The following pages include information on:

- The buildings that wildlife use
- The wildlife that use buildings
- Advice on:
 - » Legislation concerning wildlife in buildings
 - » Identifying which wildlife may be using a building
 - » Planning works on a building to minimise disturbance to wildlife
 - » Avoiding conflict with wildlife
 - » Improving buildings for wildlife
- Case studies
- Useful resources



What buildings are used by wildlife?

In order to understand which buildings are suitable for and used by wildlife, it is important to consider the reasons why birds and mammals choose to occupy and interact with buildings and the opportunities that buildings provide for wildlife. Many different birds and mammals use buildings in the Irish landscape for a variety of reasons, but most importantly because buildings can provide safe and secure sites for breeding and roosting. Certain buildings, such as old stone structures, are undoubtedly more suitable for wildlife, given the range of opportunities they offer a variety of species in the form of cracks, crevices, cavities, alcoves, ledges, chimneys and cellars. Other building types, such as modern buildings which are largely inaccessible to wildlife, may be less suitable, but can still meet the requirements of certain species. Birds may build their nests on exterior walls and roof tops, and birds and bats can access the fascia boards and attic spaces of modern buildings, often without our knowledge. Given the diverse range of species that occupy buildings, and their wide-ranging requirements, we should consider that all building types are potentially suitable for wildlife. Nevertheless, individual species prefer certain types of buildings, and it is useful to know the opportunities that different types of buildings offer and the wildlife typically associated with these sites.



Before there were buildings

Before there were buildings, cavity-nesting birds used natural features such as rock fissures and mature trees with hollow cavities. With human encroachment into natural landscapes, and extensive deforestation, the availability of natural sites decreased. As man-made structures increased, many species adapted to use the cavities available in buildings.



Barn Owl nest in a tree cavity



Feeding time at a House Martin nest

Wildlife dependent on buildings

Buildings are the most important breeding site for a wide range of wildlife in Ireland. All nine bat species which occur in Ireland use buildings, as maternity roosts and winter roosts. The majority of our breeding Swift, Swallow, House Martin, Starling and Barn Owl nest in buildings and are reliant on man-made structures.

Old stone structures

We are incredibly fortunate in Ireland that so many of our sites of cultural and historic importance, some centuries old, remain intact in the landscape. These stone structures are a rich part of our cultural heritage and provide a window into our past. At their pinnacle, these buildings were at the centre of Irish society, but are now filled with life of a different kind. As people moved out and history moved on, nature reclaimed these structures.

Buildings such as castles, tower houses, abbeys, churches and ruined mansions, which are scattered throughout the countryside, are now home to an incredible diversity of wildlife. Particularly in ruined, stone structures, there can be many opportunities for wildlife, for both cavity-nesting and open-nesting birds and bats. In some cases, every available space within these ruins is occupied. These are the most important man-made structures for biodiversity as they support the greatest diversity of wildlife, including species of conservation concern. Many of these buildings are protected structures and it is essential that we preserve these sites, both for their historic significance and for their ecological value.

Peregrine: Makes a scrape on a flat, sheltered surface, high in the building



Barn Owl: Nests in cavity of suitable size including within chimneys and putlog holes



Raven: Builds a large stick nest on a sheltered ledge



Swift: Nests in small gaps and cavities in the stonework



Jackdaw: Builds a stick-nest in any available cavity of sufficient size



Kestrel: Nests on a flat, sheltered ledge or shallow cavity



Sand Martin: Nests in small gaps and cavities in the stonework



Brown Long-eared Bat: Roosts in cellars, chimneys, small rooms and cavities.

Biodiversity hotspots

The inhabitants of this castle have included Barn Owl, Kestrel, Raven, Peregrine, Swift, Sand Martin, Jackdaw, Starling, Blue Tit and Wren, as well as several species of bat. With such a diversity of wildlife in such a small area, castles such as this one should be considered among our most important sites for biodiversity.

Abandoned farmhouses

Abandoned farmhouses are common in the Irish countryside and form a distinctive part of the rural landscape. Although they may seem to be devoid of life, this is usually not the case. From large farmhouses to small derelict cottages, these buildings are an important artificial habitat for a range of wildlife.

Chimneys and roof spaces can provide dry, dark and secluded breeding sites for cavity nesting birds, as well as bats and Pine Marten. The interiors of abandoned farmhouses provide shelter for a range of birds which use existing cavities and ledges, or build nests within the protected walls. As many of these buildings are not maintained, they risk falling into disrepair, reducing their suitability for wildlife. Abandoned farmhouses may also be renovated or demolished, and if works are carried out without due regard to the wildlife which resides within, this can result in direct disturbance, as well as the loss of breeding sites.

Jackdaw: Builds a stick-nest in any suitable cavity



Barn Owl: Nests in chimney, roof space or suitable cavity



Kestrel: Nests on a flat, sheltered ledge or shallow cavity



Starling: Nests in any suitable, small cavity



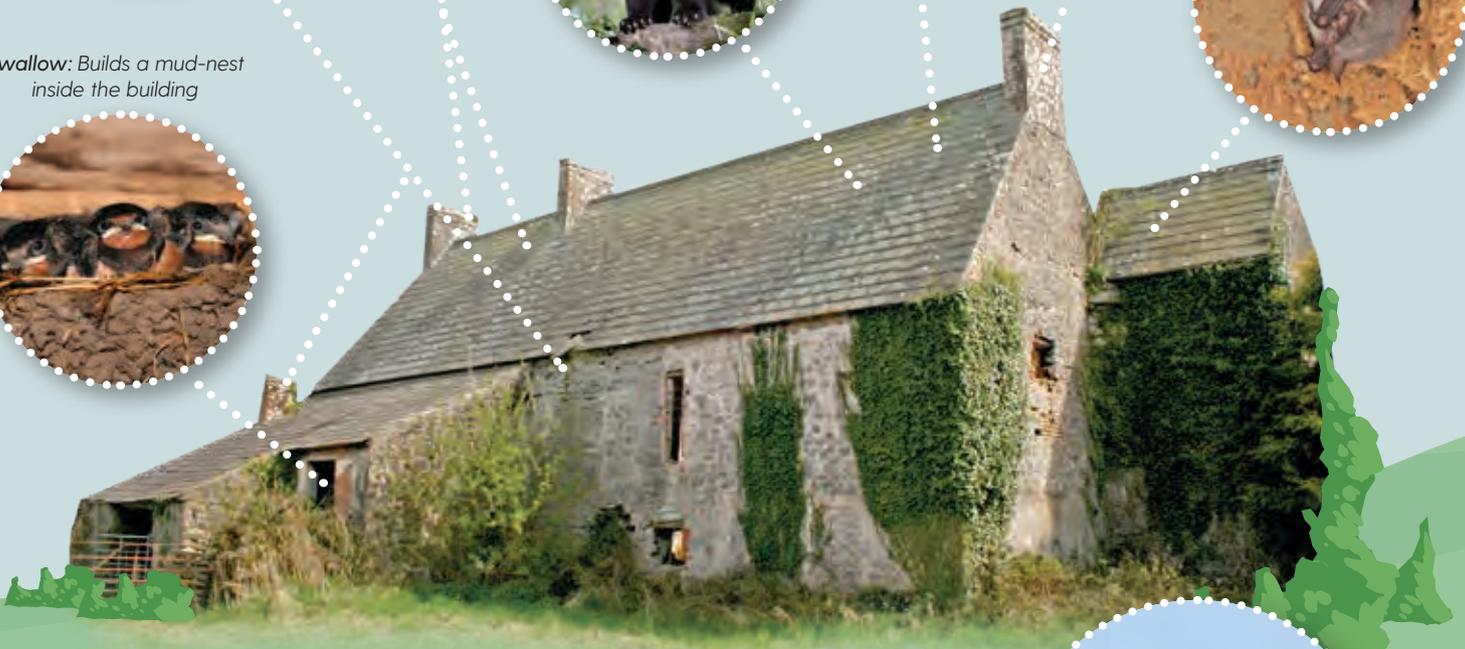
Pine Marten: Den in the roof space



Natterer's Bat: Roost in roof space



Swallow: Builds a mud-nest inside the building



It's in the name

For some species, their association with buildings is obvious from their name. The word 'barn', in the names 'Barn Owl', and 'Barn Swallow', indicates that these birds have a preference for nesting in traditional farm buildings. The word 'house', in the names, 'House Martin', and 'House Sparrow', implies that they often nest in occupied houses.



Farmyards and farm buildings

Agriculture is the dominant land use in Ireland, and the farmyard has been at the heart of rural life for many generations. Much of our wildlife occurs on farmland, and many species have adapted to take advantage of the shelter (and sometimes increased feeding opportunities) in and around farmyards. Traditional farm buildings, as well as performing many purposes, from housing livestock and poultry, to storing grain, food, hay and farm machinery, also supported an array of wildlife which has become synonymous with farming. As agriculture has become more intensive, there is less space for biodiversity, and similar changes have occurred in the farmyard.

Modern farm buildings such as hay barns and slatted houses have been essential in the drive to increase productivity and yields; however, they do not support the same abundance of wildlife that has lived in and around farmyards for hundreds of years. Maintaining traditional farm buildings can have real benefits for biodiversity, and making small changes to modern farm buildings can improve their value for wildlife. Many of the species which use farm buildings are accustomed to people and the frequent disturbances associated with active farms. However, disturbance of wildlife can be an issue in farm buildings which are less frequently used. Therefore, it is important to recognise the wildlife which may occupy farm buildings.

Lesser Horseshoe Bat:
Roosts and breeds at the
roof or in loft space



Jackdaw: Builds a stick-
nest in any suitable cavity



Swallow: Builds a mud-
nest inside the building

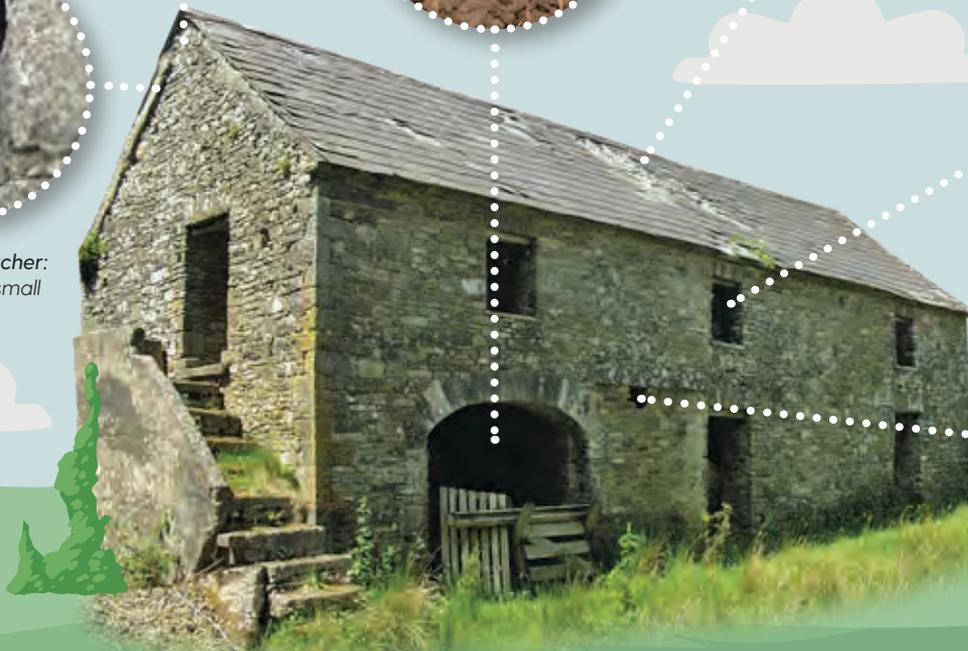


Chough: Builds a stick-nest
on a suitable ledge



Spotted Flycatcher:
Builds nest in small
cavities

Pied Wagtail: Nests in
small holes in stonework



Window to the past

Traditional stone barns were fitted with special 'owl windows' similar to this one, to allow Barn Owls to access and nest in the loft space. Barn Owls were encouraged to nest in farmyards because they helped to keep rodent numbers around the farmyard in check, thus earning them the name, 'the farmer's friend'.



Modern and occupied buildings

Many birds and mammals prefer to avoid people and the regular disturbances associated with occupied buildings. Modern buildings are usually well-sealed, with limited access to the interior, and are devoid of the cracks, crevices and ledges which certain species require. However, several species in Ireland use modern and occupied buildings, and some show a preference for these sites. The increased temperature in occupied buildings attracts certain species and proximity to people can provide greater protection from predators, or access to greater food resources.

Species such as House Martin, which build their nests on the exterior of buildings, and Starling, which access the fascia boards, are regular and obvious inhabitants. Other species such as Barn Owl, Kestrel and even Pine Marten can on occasion take up residence in our homes. In this regard modern buildings probably throw up the greatest surprises in terms of unexpected visitors, simply because we often don't expect to share our homes with wildlife. Conflict between people and wildlife can frequently occur in occupied buildings as sometimes wildlife is unwanted, and oftentimes their presence is only noticed when they reach a critical stage of breeding, when disturbance from people is most harmful. Such conflict can usually be avoided without negative impacts to homeowners or wildlife. Modern buildings can also be improved for wildlife by making small changes to existing buildings or creating space for wildlife in new builds.

House Martin: Builds a mud-nest in the apex of the roof



Common Pipistrelle: Roost in the attic space



Herring Gull: Nests on flat roof tops or even on large chimneys



Swift: Nests in small gaps and under the eaves



Starling: Nests within the fascia, or any cavity



Expect the unexpected

Wildlife tends not to follow the rules. We have listed the usual suspects that use certain types of buildings, but wherever there are opportunities, wildlife will take advantage, and this can often bring surprises. Check out this Kestrel nest, where the birds chose to nest in a window box, with a view directly into the kitchen!



Which wildlife use buildings?

Here we take a closer look at some of the birds and mammals that are associated with or dependent on buildings in Ireland, to learn more about their behaviour and to identify their presence in buildings. There are so many species that use buildings in Ireland, that it is not possible to focus on them all individually. However, familiarity with the different wildlife that can occur in buildings, coupled with an awareness of their presence, will help to ensure that we avoid disturbance, appropriately plan changes to buildings, and identify opportunities for wildlife in new-builds.

Birds in buildings

Many birds have been recorded nesting in different types of buildings in Ireland, including: Herring Gull, Peregrine Falcon, Kestrel, Chough, Raven, Jackdaw, Woodpigeon, Stock Dove, Song Thrush, Mistle Thrush, Blackbird, Wren, Robin, Spotted Flycatcher, Barn Swallow, House Martin, Sand Martin, Swift, Pied Wagtail, Grey Wagtail, Starling, Blue Tit, Great Tit, House Sparrow and Tree Sparrow.



Swifts can reach speeds of up to 110 km per hour. They spend most of their life in flight; drinking, feeding, mating and even sleeping in the air

Swift *Gabhlán Gaoithe*

Status

Summer visitor throughout Ireland from May to early September. Population is declining.



Description

Similar in size to a Swallow, but all dark except for a small, white chin-patch. In flight, they have a distinctive shape; resembling a boomerang, with scythe shaped wings and short tail. One of the fastest flying birds in Ireland. They feed on invertebrates, which are caught in flight. Their call is a loud, piercing scream, often given by pairs or in screaming parties in high-speed chases.

Breeding and buildings

Buildings are the most common and important nest sites used by Swift in Ireland. Swifts nest in small crevices, as well as in the eaves of houses. Use occupied buildings in urban areas, towns and villages, as well as derelict buildings, including ruined stone structures. They nest in colonies, and are site faithful, which means they return to the same building each summer. They can use holes in trees or caves in uplands or coastal areas, but this is rare in Ireland.

When do they use buildings?

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	------	-----	-----	-----

■ breeding ■ absent

House Martin *Gabhlán Binne*



Status

Summer visitor throughout Ireland from mid-March to late-September.



Description

Similar in size to Sand Martin and Swallow, but with a large white rump and shallow forked tail. Upper parts glossy blue-black, with white underparts. Feeds on insects such as aphids and mayflies caught in flight.

Breeding and buildings

Predominantly nest on buildings. Regularly use occupied buildings in rural, suburban and urban areas. Constructs a dome-shaped mud nest, usually underneath the eaves of a house. Nest colonially and are easily seen. Usually raises two or three broods, with some fledging as late as September and even into October.

When do they use buildings?



Swallow *Fáinleog*



Status

Widespread and common summer visitor throughout Ireland from mid-March to late-September.



Description

Similar to House Martin, but with red face-patch and long tail-streamers. Upper parts glossy dark blue, with creamy-buff under-parts. Feeds on insects caught in flight. Very vocal. Their song, consisting of several musical, twittering notes followed by a short buzz, can be frequently heard.

Breeding and buildings

Predominantly nest in buildings, including farm buildings such as barns and sheds, as well as garages; even if there is only a small entrance into the building. Can nest in busy farmyards and buildings.

When do they use buildings?



Swallow nest in a building which is frequently used by people



Starling *Druid*



Status

Common resident throughout Ireland. One of Ireland's top 20 most widespread garden birds.

Description

Slightly smaller than a thrush. Short tail and pointed wings, with pink legs. Plumage appears dark but has iridescent green and purple tones in summer. Bill is yellow in summer and dark in winter. Feed on invertebrates, fruit, cereals and seeds. Also scavenge on refuse and scraps, and along shorelines. Emits a great variety of calls. Will imitate other bird calls, including Curlew and crow, and other sounds - even car alarms and chainsaws!

Breeding and buildings

Breeds in holes or crevices in buildings (including under roof-tiles and fascia boards) in occupied houses, as well as cavities in trees.

When do they use buildings?



Spotted Flycatcher *Cuilire Liath*



Status

A widespread summer visitor from May to September.

Description

Slightly larger than a Robin. The head, back, wings and tail are grey, while the undersides are white and streaked with grey. When perched they have a distinctive long-tailed, large-headed shape. Have favourite perches from which they make short darting, agile flights to catch insects on the wing.

Breeding and buildings

Build a nest of small twigs and moss lined with feathers or hair in small holes, gaps or crevices in buildings, or in ivy against a wall. Often use old stone farm buildings and courtyards; also regularly use cavities in trees, and open-fronted nest boxes.

When do they use buildings?



Spotted Flycatcher nest in ivy surrounding the wall of a building



Jackdaw Cág

Status

Resident, widespread and common.



Description

A small species of crow. All dark-grey plumage with a lighter nape and neck-side, which contrasts with a blackish forehead. Have a uniform grey under-wing, black legs and a dark bill. Intelligent, like all crows, and social in nature; often seen in pairs. Noisy birds, often calling to one another. They feed on a wide variety of foods including invertebrates, fruit, seeds, carrion, small vertebrates and birds' eggs.

Breeding and buildings

Cavity-nesting species; regularly use buildings. Build a stick-nest in chimneys and other cavities, and nest colonially. Many pairs can nest in close proximity. Also use hollow cavities in trees, coastal cliffs and quarries.

When do they use buildings?

Jan

Feb

Mar

Apr

May

Jun

Jul

Aug

Sept

Oct

Nov

Dec

■ breeding ■ roosting

Building in a building

Jackdaws build stick-nests in cavities and holes in buildings. Each spring, more nest material is brought in and added to existing stick-nests, which can result in substantial piles of sticks in some buildings. As Jackdaws fill available holes and cavities with nest material, they create nesting opportunities for other species. Barn Owls, for example, don't construct a nest, and can only use chimneys which have been blocked by Jackdaws. Most Barn Owl nests in chimneys are on top of old Jackdaw nests.



Jackdaw nest material has blocked the chimney of an abandoned farmhouse and has gathered at the fireplace

On the rise

The breeding population of Peregrine in Ireland is continuing to recover after a period of extensive declines during the 1950s and 1960s, which was primarily due to secondary poisoning by organochlorine pesticides. Increasingly, breeding Peregrine use buildings, including large, ruined structures, churches and high-rise buildings in towns and cities. Although such structures in the heart of city centres may seem vastly different to remote coastal cliffs and rocky outcrops in upland areas traditionally used by Peregrine, these buildings provide suitable and undisturbed nesting sites. Peregrine may also benefit from the availability of prey which are associated with urban centres.



Peregrine are one of the fastest animals on the planet. They hunt and catch other birds in flight

Kestrel *Pocaire Gaoithe*



Status

Resident and widespread; one of our most common birds of prey. Declining.



Description

A small species of falcon with long, relatively narrow wings and tail, and short, hooked bill. Male and female Kestrels have different plumages: males have a blue-grey, finely streaked head, upper-tail and rump, while females have brown-streaked plumage, with a series of bands on the brown upper-tail. Their name in Irish translates as 'the wind puncher' which describes their hovering behaviour when hunting. Feed mostly on small mammals and birds, as well as frogs, lizards, and invertebrates.

Breeding and buildings

Nest in ruined and stone structures, where they make a scrape on a sheltered ledge. Also use a range of other nest sites, including the stick-nests of other species, trees, tree cavities, coastal cliffs, quarries and nest boxes.

When do they use buildings?



Herring Gull *Faoileán Scadán*



Status

Resident on all Irish coasts. Population declining, although numbers in some coastal urban areas have increased.



Description

A large gull, adult plumage is white with light-grey upper-wings and black wing-tips. Have pink legs and a heavy yellow bill, which has an orange spot. Immature birds are brown with finely patterned feathers, and can be difficult to tell apart from immatures of Lesser and Greater Black-back Gulls. As opportunistic predators and scavengers, they follow fishing boats, use landfill sites, and scavenge scraps in urban areas.

Breeding and buildings

Their use of buildings in coastal urban areas is increasing, particularly in Dublin, but also in other coastal cities and towns. They typically nest on flat roof-tops and even chimneys. Several pairs can use the same building. Also breed in colonies around the coast of Ireland.

When do they use buildings?



Bats in buildings

Although eleven species of bat have been recorded in Ireland, nine species are confirmed to be resident – all of which use buildings. These are:

- | | | |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Common Pipistrelle | 4. Lesser Horseshoe Bat | 7. Leisler's Bat |
| 2. Soprano Pipistrelle | 5. Daubenton's Bat | 8. Natterer's Bat |
| 3. Brown Long-eared Bat | 6. Nathusius' Pipistrelle | 9. Whiskered Bat |

Bats are usually seasonal visitors to buildings, but most types of building are used at different times of year. Between mid-March and September, breeding female bats form maternity roosts to give birth and raise their pups. Most bats choose buildings as maternity roosts to take advantage of warm locations, including occupied buildings. In winter, bats enter torpor (hibernation) and need quiet, undisturbed roosts of relatively constant temperature. Cellars, crevices, chimneys and roof spaces of abandoned buildings are commonly used. Bats can also use roosts in buildings as 'transition roosts', between summer breeding and winter hibernation, or 'night roosts', in which to rest between feeding periods.

Bat of the aristocracy

The Lesser Horseshoe Bat is known as the 'bat of the aristocracy,' as they roost in old, historic ruins. They can't crawl into crevices and tight spaces like other bat species, so have to be able to fly into roost spaces. They are the only bat species in Ireland which hang upside down, with their wings wrapped around their body.



Lesser Horseshoe Bat *Crú-ialtóg Beag*

Status

Range limited to six counties along the west coast (Mayo, Galway, Clare, Limerick, Kerry and Cork). The population is thought to be increasing. Inadequate Conservation Status (NPWS Habitats Directive Reporting, 2019).

Description

They have a distinctive 'nose-leaf,' comprised of folds of skin around their nostrils, which forms a horseshoe shape. The only Irish species to hang upside down from its feet, with wings wrapped around its body. Forage in woodland, scrub and along hedgerows for insects such as midges, moths, caddisflies and craneflies, caught in the air or from vegetation.

Breeding and buildings

Form maternity roosts in the roof spaces of buildings such as old houses, stables, and outhouses in summer. Rarely use occupied buildings. In winter, they hibernate in cellars of old ruins, as well as caves, mines and souterrains.

When do they use buildings?



Common Pipistrelle *Ialtóg Fheascrach*

Status

Our most common bat; widespread. Favourable Conservation Status (NPWS Habitats Directive Reporting, 2019).



Description

The Common Pipistrelle, along with the similar-sized Soprano Pipistrelle, are the two smallest bat species in the country - both weigh no more than a €1 coin. They have brown fur on the body, and black skin on the ears and face, which appears mask-like. Most likely to be seen flying soon after dusk in both urban and rural areas. They have a fast, twisting flight; hunt insects (such as midges, mosquitoes, small moths) in the air. May consume up to 3,000 insects in one night.

Breeding and buildings

This species, along with the Soprano Pipistrelle, are the species most likely to use occupied buildings as maternity roosts. Tend to occupy crevices, rather than open attic spaces, in a variety of modern and old structures.

When do they use buildings?



What did you call me?

Like all Irish bats, Brown Long-eared Bats use echolocation to hunt, by emitting high-frequency calls which allow them to locate their prey. Their calls are very quiet, but are easily picked-up by their sensitive ears. They tuck their large ears under their wings to protect them during hibernation!



Brown Long-eared Bat *Ialtóg Fhad-chluasach*

Status

Widespread. Favourable Conservation Status (NPWS Habitats Directive Reporting, 2019).

Description

They have highly distinctive large ears, which are nearly the same length as their body. They have long fur which grades from greyish-brown to yellowish brown on their upper sides, with buff-coloured fur on their undersides, and pink faces. Forage for insects amongst foliage.

Breeding and buildings

Roost in large attic spaces, outbuildings and churches, as well as holes in trees.

When do they use buildings?



Pine Marten *Cat Crainn*



Status

Once rare; is now widespread. The population is increasing after a period of significant declines due to loss of habitat, hunting and poisoning.

Description

A member of the weasel family, they are similar in size to a cat. Have a rich brown coat and cream-coloured bib, a long tail, rounded ears and a broad, flat forehead with a pointed face. They are mostly nocturnal and arboreal, as their name in Irish, which translates as 'tree cat', implies. Omnivorous; feed on small mammals, frogs, birds, eggs, insects and fruit.

Breeding and buildings

Breeding female Pine Martens sometimes den in buildings. Pine Martens can use attic spaces of abandoned houses and holiday homes. Occasionally use occupied buildings where access allows; also use tree cavities, rock crevices, burrows, nests, old squirrel dreys and log piles.

When do they use buildings?



Newer is not always better

The gaps, cavities, crevices and ledges which are a feature in the stonework of older buildings are such an important resource for wildlife. Newer buildings are typically devoid of such features. As new buildings replace older structures, this can reduce the availability of breeding and roosting sites for species such as Swift, Barn Owl and our bat species. It is really important that we protect these sites which are so important for wildlife. There is also a lot that we can do to make modern buildings more suitable for wildlife. In the following sections we explore how we can replicate some of these features in new buildings, to accommodate wildlife.



The aerial view of this castle shows the range of cavities and ledges available to wildlife

Record your sightings

Building up reliable information on the presence and distribution of wildlife is essential in ensuring their protection. You can help by reporting your sightings and information on wildlife breeding or roosting in buildings to the National Biodiversity Data Centre: www.biodiversityireland.ie



Small derelict cottages such as this one can host many different species of wildlife

