

How to Say Thank You to Bats

By Jane Smith, Batty Laureate 2022

The trees were the reason we chose this place. Tall, proud silver birches; a bright green laurel, home to multiple blackbird families; a pine standing to attention as if listening to the clouds; a plum and a cherry, all blossom then all fruit then all wasps; and a splendidly exuberant old beech tree, all dappled light in the summer before bursting into its gorgeous copper symphony in the Autumn. The old red brick house in the middle of the garden was if anything, after the wonder of the trees, a bonus.

Good homes are not just bricks and mortar, but also sanctuaries – and our creaky house with its garden of beautiful trees is my sanctuary. But not only mine.

A few days after we moved in, I was sitting in the garden admiring the tree tops on a soft late summer evening. Boxes were still unpacked but they could wait; mild nights like these demanded my full attention. A velvety wood pigeon was waddling on the grass, I could hear an owl somewhere and my dog, lying near the pond with one eye open, was half-watching a dragonfly doing its rounds. Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye I saw something moving high up between the trees, then watched the gap of sky for further clues. I gasped, then smiled. Bats!

In the years since that first evening watching the bats between the trees, I've spent so many hours observing them, learning about them, planting things specifically for them and making our home as bat-friendly as possible. In the past I'd watched Parisian bats in the twilight flitting around the buttresses of Notre Dame; I'd stopped dead in my tracks to see large groups fly back to their roost in a Cheshire field; I'd enjoyed their nightly routines in and out of cracks in old barns in Snowdonia; and I'd joined organized bat walks to see them swoop across lakes at dusk. But I'd never *lived with* bats, and to find so wonderful a gift in my own garden was something I hoped I'd never take for granted.

This summer marked my eleventh year in this house, and the bats here have been a constant source of joy, pride and concern. I don't think I'll ever tire of watching their breakneck speeds, their seemingly reckless acrobatics which I now know are, in fact, very far from reckless. Nothings bats do is unconsidered or unnecessary; they've evolved to be the most accomplished of fliers, the most careful energy

preservers, the smartest feeders, the most skilled parents. The world of bats, at first glance incredibly complicated, is super-structured; the individuals know their place in the vast architecture of their collective bat life, and it's a system that works astonishingly well.

Our own human practices, on the other hand, don't always work well, especially when it comes to co-existing with the natural world. Bats and their habitat, on both the micro and macro scale, are threatened by a whole litany of human activity, from housing development and road-building through street lighting and insecticides to 5G masts and new high-speed rail networks. Bats are up against it as they've never been before - and the 'it', sadly, is us.

Living with bats gives a window, or perhaps more correctly, a shadow box of fleeting but unforgettable glimpses into the world of these strangely unknowable creatures that are at once widespread and mysterious, nearby and distant, alongside us and yet distinctly apart from us.

Last night I was sitting in my garden admiring the bats as I've done for eleven years now. I've never tired of it, nor lost the sense that *we* moved in with *them*. But the gift of living with bats is such a precious thing, it needs to be paid back – by advocating for them, speaking for them, writing about them.

As I came into the house and turned on my laptop, the bright white light of the screen a shock after the dusk in the garden, I looked up and saw a bat, or perhaps two bats, twisting through the trees outside the bay window, some of those trees that made us choose this house, this place that was already home to the bats.

Living with bats, I entered a kind of covenant – *I will protect this space for you. But more than that, the joy you bring me here will emanate outwards into the wider spheres because I'll speak for you wherever I can in our human world, carrying your message of co-existence, together yet apart.*

That, I think, is the only way we can really say thank you to bats.