
**This email has been sent to bat group contacts only.
Please forward this information to others in your group.**

Dear bat group member,

Thank you to everyone who has been in touch asking for advice about surveys and other bat group activities now that most COVID-19 restrictions have been lifted across the UK or are likely to be lifted soon. Please do check the situation for your area as there continue to be some differences between the devolved administrations and across different local authorities. It remains important that everyone follows the relevant Government guidance for the part of the British Islands in which they are based.

This bulletin is long overdue. In the last few months, we have had updated guidance from the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Bat Specialist Group (BSG) for field work with bats as well as for bat rehabilitators. BCT has contributed to these updates and much of our guidance set out in the bulletin is in line with those recommendations. The main consideration going forward is that SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, is becoming endemic in the human population. We therefore need to modify our approach to disease risk management in our ongoing work with bats.

We have prepared this special edition bulletin about bat group activities and COVID-19 to cover the following:

1. Current Understanding of SARS-CoV-2 Human to Bat Transmission Risk
2. Bat Group Activities Not Involving Handling of Bats
3. Education Bats at Events
4. Bat Group Activities Involving Handling of Bats
5. Bat Rehabilitation Activities
6. Testing of Bats for SARS-CoV-2
7. Other Advice for Professional Ecologists

If you have any questions on the content of this bulletin, please get in touch with Lisa Worledge at lworledge@bats.org.uk and if you have questions more generally about bat group activities, insurance, etc. then please contact Abby Packham at batgroups@bats.org.uk

1. Current Understanding of SARS-CoV-2 Human to Bat Transmission Risk

SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes the disease COVID-19, is becoming endemic in the human population. Alongside this we now know that several other mammal species are also susceptible to infection with SARS-CoV-2, including dogs, cats (both domestic pets and big cats in zoos including lions, tigers, pumas, and snow leopards), mink, otter, gorilla, and white-tailed deer. Further there have been cases where infected animals have transmitted the virus to other animals through direct contact. See World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) website for more information <https://www.oie.int/en/what-we-offer/emergency-and-resilience/covid-19/>.

There haven't been any confirmed cases of SARS-CoV-2 infection in bats outside of experimental work with Egyptian fruit bats. Another study with big brown bats found they were not susceptible to infection. However, we simply do not know the susceptibility of any other bat species to SARS-CoV-2 outside of these two experiments and some theoretical modelling work.

Several recently discovered 'SARS like' coronaviruses (belonging to the same subgenus of viruses as SARS-CoV-2) have been described in horseshoe bat species, including one from a single lesser horseshoe bat in the UK, but that doesn't mean these viruses are pathogenic to humans. SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, has so far never been isolated from a bat in the wild (just the experimental infections mentioned above). Whilst the ancestor virus to SARS-CoV-2 may well have been hosted by a horseshoe bat species, it is estimated to have diverged from a bat virus at least 40 years ago. You can read more about bats and discoveries of new viruses in a news item from April on the BCT website at: <https://www.bats.org.uk/news/2021/04/bats-and-discoveries-of-new-viruses>

It is essential that we continue to take appropriate precautions to minimize any risk of human to bat transmission of SARS-CoV-2 when handling bats or working in close proximity to them. In line with IUCN BSG guidance this includes "wearing masks and gloves when handling bats, regularly disinfecting equipment that comes in contact with bats, and minimizing time in contact/proximity with bats." This requirement is going to be with us for the foreseeable future to protect bats. We hope it will become as second nature as wearing gloves to reduce the risk from rabies should be.

2. Bat Group Activities Not Involving Handling of Bats

With all of the Government restrictions around COVID-19 now lifted or about to be lifted, core bat group activities such as bat walks and talks are getting booked in again, which is great news!

Risk assessments should be completed for all such activities (see <https://www.bats.org.uk/resources/resources-for-bat-groups/insurance-cover-for-bat-groups>), and you should add in consideration of COVID-19 to those assessments.

Please ask anyone who is currently positive for COVID-19, or suspect they might be, not to attend in-person events. As always, you should not feel that you have to carry out activities if you have any concerns about the health and safety of yourself or other people in your group. From a human health perspective you might wish to continue with simple hygiene measures such as having hand sanitiser available when away from hand washing facilities, encouraging people to wear masks when grouped together indoors, and wiping down bat detectors after use on bat walks.

3. Education Bats at Events

Whilst having live bats can really enhance a talk, a training event, or exhibition stand, the risk of human to bat transmission of SARS-CoV-2 must be considered. Good use has been made of alternatives since the start of the pandemic, such as videos of natural bat behaviour and live links to bat rehabilitators. Whilst not the same as live bats such approaches can still be engaging. If you do wish to bring education bats to an event, then the IUCN BSG guidance for bat rehabilitators (see section 5. Bat Rehabilitation Activities) advises that permanent captives (i.e. bats that are not going to be released) may be taken to events but they should be kept in enclosed plastic boxes, and the ventilation covered with a facemask or equivalent (e.g. using elastic bands to hold in place). The bats must not be taken out of their plastic box and handled at the event. Mesh/net containers for bats shouldn't be used at events as they don't offer any protection against aerosol transmission. As always bat welfare should be the paramount consideration.

4. Bat Group Activities Involving Handling of Bats

Alongside the walks and talks, everyone is keen to get back to practical bat activities, bat box checks, research projects involving advanced techniques, etc. The latest guidance from the IUCN BSG that covers field work can be found on their website at:

https://www.iucnbsg.org/uploads/6/5/0/9/6509077/amp_recommendations_for_researchers_final.pdf and is summarised in the infographic at Figure 1 (also available from the website). Please note

that anyone currently positive for COVID-19, or who suspects they might be, should not be participating in field work with bats.

This new version of the IUCN BSG guidance has moved away from the blanket recommendation of stopping all but essential activities with bats. Instead it now sets out a way of assessing the risk of field work activities exposing bats to SARS-CoV-2 by considering current infection rates in an area, the vaccination status generally and of the field work participants specifically. If that calculation comes out as high risk (red) then people are referred back to the original version of the guidance which was about minimizing activities, see:

[https://www.iucnbsg.org/uploads/6/5/0/9/6509077/map_recommendations_for_researchers_v. 1.0 final.pdf](https://www.iucnbsg.org/uploads/6/5/0/9/6509077/map_recommendations_for_researchers_v.1.0_final.pdf)). If the risk calculation comes out as medium (amber) or low (green) then field work can go ahead and the guidelines go into detail about the measures that should be taken to modify activities and protect bats (inc. wearing of masks and gloves, field hygiene, use of lateral flow tests, etc). To complete the risk calculations set out in the IUCN BSG guidance you may find the information at: <https://coronavirus.data.gov.uk/> helpful.

You should work through the IUCN BSG risk calculations for the part of the UK in which you will be undertaking your field work, also considering the people who will be attending and where they are travelling from. If you complete that assessment and the overall risk comes out as high (red) then you should postpone the activities (see above). If that assessment comes out as medium (amber) then you can cautiously go ahead but must consider how you can modify the activities and mitigate the risks using the methods in the guidance. It is unlikely that an assessment would come out as low risk (green) in the UK because we still have relatively high infection rates. However, even if the risk is low the IUCN BSG is still recommending that anyone undertaking field work with bats adopts good hygiene practices, including the wearing of a mask and gloves, and following disinfection procedures.

Preventing human-to-bat transmission of SARS-CoV-2

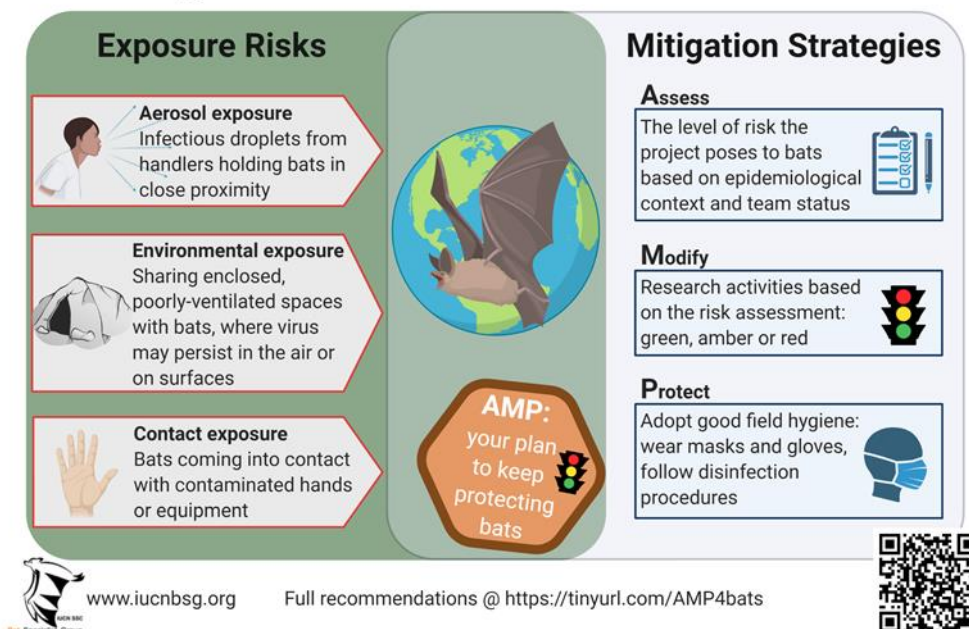


Figure 1. Infographic summarising current IUCN BSG guidance on field work with bats.

It is important to be mindful of the changing situation in the UK. You may need to repeat the risk assessment if there is a significant rise in cases in the area you are working in. For example it is

highly likely that there will be more new coronavirus variants that may have an impact on COVID-19 cases over the coming months and years.

As well as the wider situation with regards to COVID-19 cases, there may also be changes with the field work team. The IUCN BSG guidance suggests use of lateral flow tests before starting field work but if your project is taking place over a period of time then periodic testing may be appropriate as well. If one of the participants is found to have COVID-19 then they should cease any work with bats immediately and only return when they are recovered (i.e. negative test results).

Everyone should be taking the appropriate precautions, gloves, masks, field hygiene, as the IUCN BSG guidance sets out. These precautions aim to minimize any risk and regular testing where field work is taking place over a period of times means the initial results aren't assumed to be the ongoing position.

There are plans for the IUCN BSG to produce guidance on general disease risk management during field work. We will look to develop some UK specific guidance as capacity allows this winter.

5. Bat Rehabilitation Activities

The latest guidance from the IUCN BSG that covers bat rehabilitation can be found on their website at:

https://www.iucnbsg.org/uploads/6/5/0/9/6509077/map_recommendations_for_rehabbers_30_june_2021_1_.pdf and is summarised in the infographic at Figure 2 (also available from the website). Please note that anyone currently positive for COVID-19, or who suspects they might be, should not be undertaking bat care.

Overall these guidelines are similar to those published last year but have been updated as we have learned more about the risks to bats, to reflect the forms of testing now available for humans (e.g. lateral flow tests) and bats, and to cover taking education bats to events (as mentioned in section 3. above). Bat carers should still wear masks and gloves, minimise contact with bats, minimise the number of different people that have contact with the same bat, disinfect equipment, keep bats separately unless known to be from the same roost or a mother and pup, and follow good hygiene practices.

With COVID-19 becoming endemic in the human population it is important bat carers remain vigilant about good disease risk management practices. The guidance also recommends the testing of bats that have had contact with people who have been confirmed as having, or suspected of having, COVID-19. This is an area we are actively working on, see section 6. below.

We are in the process of updating the BCT specific guidance for bat rehabilitators ('COVID-19 Good Practice Guidelines for Bat Rehabilitators: Managing Disease Risk'). It will be in line with the IUCN BSG guidance and requirements of the UK Statutory Nature Conservation Organisations. We will contact those on our Bat Care Network as soon as the updated guidance is available and also share the link via the Facebook Bat Rehabilitators Group. In the meantime we encourage all bat carers to read the IUCN BSG guidance if you haven't already. There is also useful information on disinfecting equipment and recommendations around face coverings in the IUCN BSG guidance for field work, see the link in section 4. above.

Preventing human-to-bat transmission of SARS-CoV-2 *for bat rehabilitation*

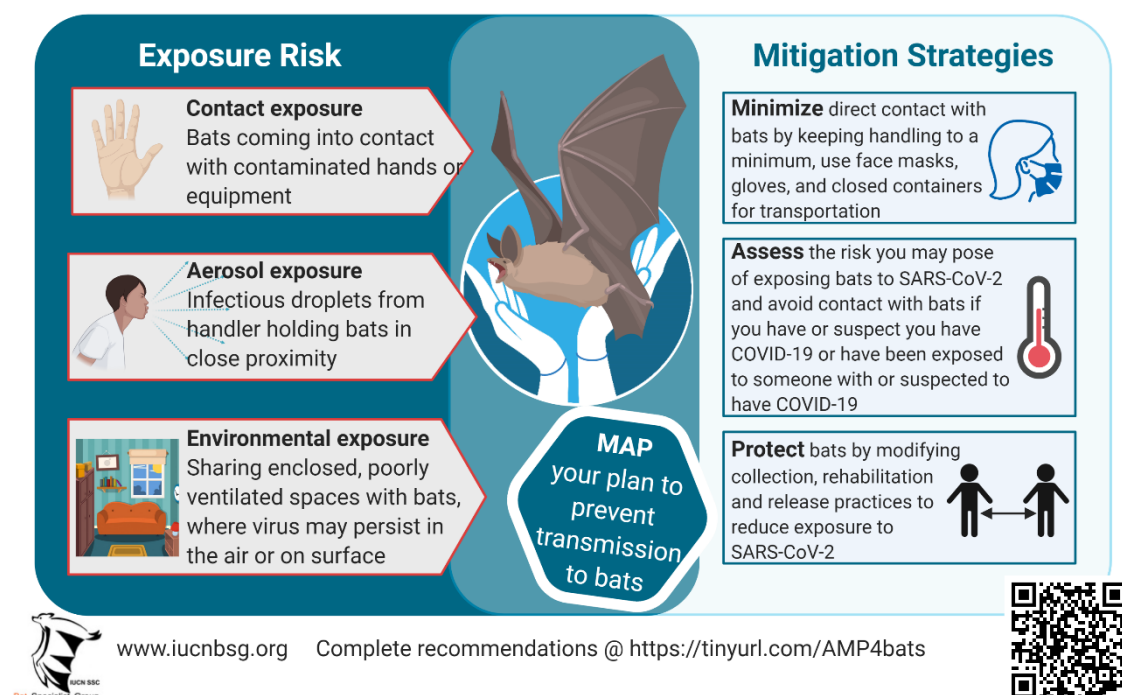


Figure 2. Infographic summarising current IUCN BSG guidance for bat rehabilitators.

6. Testing of Bats for SARS-CoV-2

The IUCN BSG guidance for bat rehabilitators covers the testing of bats which have been in contact with people who have been confirmed as having COVID-19 or are suspected of having the disease. We are working with Imperial College London and the Animal & Plant Health Agency (APHA) to produce a testing protocol. We plan to include this in the revised BCT guidance for bat rehabilitators mentioned in section 5. above.

We would like to thank Vincent Savolainen and his team at Imperial College London for their work on this, the team at APHA for the review of the protocol currently underway, and especially those bat carers who are piloting the testing protocol at the moment.

Please get in touch if you have a bat in care that has come into contact with a person who has tested positive for COVID-19 or is suspected of having COVID-19. Bats that have had such contact should not be released without testing having taken place. Email Lisa Worledge at: lworledge@bats.org.uk or Laura Brown at: batcare@bats.org.uk for more details.

7. Other Advice for Professional Ecologists

In addition to the IUCN BSG and BCT guidance, other organisations have published information specifically aimed at professional ecologists:

- Natural England and Defra guidance 'Coronavirus (COVID-19): Surveying and mitigation works affecting wildlife' (including entering bat roosts and handling bats) is available from the GOV.UK website at: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-surveying-and-mitigation-works-affecting-wildlife> (last updated 09/08/21)

- CIEEM 'Guidance on Ecological Survey and Assessment in the UK During the COVID-19 Outbreak' (last updated in February 2021) is available online at: <https://cieem.net/i-am/covid-19/cv19-future-decision-making-with-limited-survey-data/>

As the Bat Surveys for Professional Ecologists: Good Practice Guidelines are reviewed and revised we will include updated disease risk management information. The 4th edition is due to be published next year.

Our shared aim is to protect bats from the direct threat of catching SARS-CoV-2 from humans and the damage that would do to bat conservation. Thank you for working with us on this important issue. We will continue to monitor this ever-changing situation and keep you updated.

A copy of this bulletin is also available on the BCT website under the Resources for Bat Groups pages at: <https://www.bats.org.uk/resources/resources-for-bat-groups/bat-group-bulletin/special-edition-bat-group-bulletins>.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Abby".

Abby Packham
Bat Groups Officer

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