

Code of conduct in caves as a foundation for the protection of bats

There are approximately 30 species of bats registered in Croatia - almost all of those who come to Europe. All of our bats feed on bugs and therefore represent a biological pesticide. Since there are no bugs in winter, bats have developed the ability to hibernate, that is, to enter a winter sleep.

During hibernation, all of their vital functions are reduced to a minimum and the animal is dependent on the fat reserves it has gathered during the winter (the body temperature is a few degrees above the ambient temperature, breathing and heart rate are slowed down, and metabolic rate is reduced). Not all species hibernate at the same locations and temperature ranges, but each has its own demands.

Locations they choose for hibernation in most cases have to be cold and damp. Some species hibernate underground (caves, pits, artificial tunnels, mines, etc.), whereas some settle in tree hollows, attics, cracks in a building, windows, cellars, and similar.

Main reasons for the diminishment of the number of bats in the world, including Croatia, are: uncontrollable use of pesticides; using tree protection products that are toxic to warm-blooded animals; changing the habitat they hunt in – the disappearance of prey; disturbing the locations where they hibernate or breed, and the disappearance of such objects.

Protection of bats in caves is only one part of the wholesome protection. It comprises both the protection in summer during reproduction and in winter during hibernation.

When they breed in summer, which is between April and August in Croatia, visiting such caves should be avoided in order not to cause stress and eventually abortion in pregnant female bats, or prevent them from recognizing their cub in a big colony when returning from the night's hunt.

In winter, visiting should also be reduced to a minimum in those caves where big colonies hibernate. Each awakening caused by external stress leads to an increase in bat's body temperature, the unnecessary burning of fat reserves which would suffice for another ten days, and in some species for even two and a half months of winter sleep!

In Great Britain, all bats and their habitats are protected by law, while locations of big colonies are under strict protection and cannot be entered without a special permit. Despite good and efficient protective measures, and developed awareness of animal protection in most people, Bat Conservation Trust (Great Britain) published a Code of conduct for conserving bats in underground sites.

Code of conduct for conserving bats in underground sites:

Caves and mines, their formations, artifacts and fauna, are all part of the natural heritage. All visitors to underground sites should strive to conserve these habitats for both present and future generations.

Keep in mind that bats need your help in order to survive winter. Many hibernating bats are difficult to notice – many of them get into cracks and crevices, while only species of horseshoe bats hang freely. Just because you cannot see them, it doesn't mean they aren't there!!

Those who visit (e.g. for recreational purposes) locations where bats are known to hibernate, should check out the voluntary code of conduct and abide by special restrictions.

Don't touch the bats or take them into your hands.
Watch out for the bats when moving through narrow passages.

Don't take photos of bat colonies.
Flashes can greatly disturb them.

Don't heat up the bat that is hibernating.
This could wake him up. Don't stay too long in narrow spaces because even your body temperature could wake him up.

Don't use bright light to illuminate the bats.
Both light and warmth can facilitate awakening.

Don't use carbide lamps where there are bats.
Carbide lamps are especially unwanted because of the warmth and smoke.

Don't smoke and make loud noises in the underground.
Any significant stimulus could wake up the bat.

Don't organize big parties, concerts and visits which include a large number of people at these locations during the winter and summer.
Survival exercises should also be avoided when the bats are present.

Seek an advice before mining or digging.
Explosives can cause trouble because of the detonation and accompanying vapors. In locations known for bats, mining should be restricted to a period when the bats aren't there.

BATS AND THE LAW

All bats are protected by law.

It is forbidden to intentionally kill them, wound them or take them, to disturb their colonies; or to damage, destroy and close access to any location in use by the bats.