

BaTML Factsheet: Harp trapping; guidance notes for bat workers

Author: Kirsty Morrison*

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*Correspondence details: email: kirstymorr@yahoo.co.uk

Introduction

In the UK a number of bat workers and researchers have incorporated harp trapping within their survey methods in order to capture bats in the field. This factsheet outlines some useful points to consider if you are planning to become involved with this approach.

Licensing

A standard Roost Visitors bat licence does not allow the licensee to use a harp trap. The recognised SNCO for the area (in Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage) has to be approached in order that the appropriate extension to a bat worker's license can be granted. Prior to granting such an extension, at the very least, the SNCO would expect the bat worker to have undergone training by an expert regarding the safe use of the trap.

Why capture bats in the first place?

There are many reasons why bat workers and researchers may wish to capture bats, including:

- to identify species and sex of bats using an area
- to monitor specific roosts/sites
- to ring individual bats
- to study recapture rates, thus showing roost fidelity and longevity of life

Why use a harp trap?

There are a number of methods that could be used in order to capture bats in the field. Harp traps can be beneficial for the following reasons:

- Allow bats to be caught whilst foraging or commuting
- Relatively safe and cause less distress to bats than mist netting
- Reasonably portable and relatively easy to assemble
- Have a better capture rate per surface area than mist netting

Hints and tips

At first a harp trap looks quite a daunting piece of equipment. Once you know where everything goes, however, it soon becomes a fairly easy and quick process to erect on site. Most harp traps comprise of a number of components including:

- the head / side supports
- bottom central support with separator
- pieces to secure the stability of the trap
- 4 extendable legs
- Cloth/plastic collecting bag

Assembly of harp traps

Here are some points to bear in mind whilst putting the trap together:

- Always consider how many people are required to safely assemble the trap in the location you intend to use it. Usually a minimum of two (ideally three) persons are required.
- Open the carrying bag, remove the pieces and slide the trap out. Be careful to return any unused items into the carrying case as this will ensure you know where everything is later when it gets dark and nothing is left behind when you leave the site.
- After fixing the side supports continue to hold them and avoid excess pressure or bending to any components. If it is necessary to lift the trap, lift with the secure area that is holding everything in place. This is usually the strongest part of the trap.
- When using the trap for the first time, remove one or two of the outer lines at either side. This will greatly reduce the chances of the lines becoming entangled when rolling up or down.
- Whilst unwinding/winding the lines do so slowly, holding fingers over the end of the bar to prevent lines crossing over.
- Whilst tightening the trap, extend the side supports slowly and check that there are no tangled lines.
- When ready for use the lines should feel taut but not like cheese wire. If they are too tight, the bats are likely to bounce off. If they are too loose, the bats may fly through, become entangled or avoid altogether, as the movement of loose lines in the

wind may make bats more aware of the traps existence.

- Do not attach the collecting bag until the trap is in position. This will usually make the trap less cumbersome to manoeuvre.
- Attach the collecting bag to the trap and tuck in the ends towards the inside. This will usually help prevent bats escaping once captured.
- If conditions are windy, the trap should be secured with guy ropes.
- Once the trap is in place, other than during periodical checks for bats, do not shine lights in its direction as this will alert bats as to its presence.

Where to position the trap

Harp traps can be used in many scenarios, including:

- outside a known or likely roost entrance (i.e. cave) where hand netting is not practical
- in a habitat corridor/watercourse where bats are likely to be foraging/commuting

Ideally the trap should be placed with an element of surprise for best results, i.e. around a corner where bats are known to commute, but less likely to detect the presence of it from a distance.

Accessories

There are many extra items of equipment that may prove useful whilst harp trapping, i.e. tent pegs, peg hammer, guy ropes, gaffer tape, dry-wash, gloves and extra long lasting lighting. In addition, scaffolding netting can be positioned at either side of the trap to guide the bats towards it. Bats may occasionally land on this but are unlikely to become entangled, however remember to always check the netting thoroughly prior to folding up at the end of each evening. Further, if the trapping location is such that potentially bats may fly underneath the trap, consider using material or scaffolding netting to block off this route.

Catching and processing bats

Consider carefully what time of the season you intend to trap at specific sites and the benefits you hope to gain by doing so. Avoid trapping in the vicinity of maternity roosts when females may be heavily pregnant or tending young.

The trap should be in position in plenty time, preferably when some daylight is still left, but not so early as to risk trapping birds.

Once in the trap the bats tend to settle in corners or folds within the bag and behave calmly. Speed is of the essence however as it is important that bats are allowed to continue with their nightly activities as soon as possible.

- The bats should be studied and released as quickly as possible near to where they were captured in the first place.
- The bag should be checked and emptied after about 20mins. If however the trap is accessible and it is possible to remove bats as/when they are captured this will speed up the whole process and thus be beneficial for all concerned.
- Ideally each bat should be bagged individually and bats should be processed in the order in which they were captured.
- Watch out for head-torches getting tangled in the lines.
- Always check the collecting bag thoroughly at the end of each night to ensure that no bats have tucked themselves away in corners or folds.

Health & Safety considerations

All the usual health & safety considerations with regard to bat survey work apply. Some of these are amplified when using harp traps and risk assessments regarding the use of the equipment and of specific sites should always be conducted. Normal bat handling procedures apply in that anyone handling bats must be vaccinated against rabies and wear appropriate handling gloves. We also recommend that anyone helping to put the harp trap up or away washes their hands afterwards irrespective of whether or not they have handled any bats and before eating any food etc.

Bibliography

The following resources contain useful information on harp trapping:

British Bats J D Altringham. HarperCollins 2003.

Bat Workers Manual A J Mitchell-Jones & A P McLeish. Joint Nature Conservation Committee 2004 3rd edition

Austbat Harp Trap Manual

www.faunatech.co

www.batmanagement.com

The trap used by BaTML is an AUSTBAT harp trap, purchased via Alana Ecology Ltd.