

Newsletter Autumn 2015

A Night in the Forest



Colin Edwards relates the story of an eventful summer night at one of our county's most beautiful locations

This season has seen a return to the National Trust site at Hatfield Forest to follow up on the highly successful season we had in 2013, which culminated in the tracking of a female Daubenton's and a female Natterer's. In both the 2013 and 2009 seasons, we had been lucky enough to detect Nathusius's pipistrelles and this was enough to attract Daniel Hargreaves to the site in August this year, adding his traps and sonic lures to our own in an attempt to get our hands on one to radio-tag and track as part of the local and national study of this species.

The evening started early with a team of nine placing two mist nets and a harp trap to the east of the lake and a further two traps tight against the water's edge to the west of the lake, with Daniel using his vast experience to select what turned out to be some very good locations.

To the east, no sooner had we set the mist nets than the bat activity started, with two Daubenton's in one of the nets and a Daubenton's and a pipistrelle in the other. Tim Sapsford and Andrew Palmer, having had previous guidance from Daniel on mist net extractions, took charge of the nets for the evening whilst the rest of us concentrated on the harp traps. The early Daubenton's activity had seen the bats coming into the nets from the east. This is an area of Hatfield Forest (Gravel Pit Coppice) where a good sized Daubenton's roost had been located in 2009 and proves that the bats are still using the area as a roost site.

A processing area was set up beside the Shell House, with Pat taking care to ensure the details were recorded correctly and everyone getting some experience in handling, identification and processing, with Daniel on hand to pass on his expertise to those that needed it.

The harp traps west of the lakes were also having good success rates. Everybody stayed on until 12.30am, at which point four of the team had to leave, but by this time they had helped to process common and soprano pips, Daubenton's, Natterer's and a lone brown long-eared bat.



A common pipistrelle readies itself for take-off [Colin Edwards]

In respect of what we were looking for the team was split. Of course the main aim was to catch and ring an elusive Nathusius' pipistrelle, but I was keen to trap and tag a female barbastelle and to further extend the known number of species for the site from the recorded ten to include a WAB - a whiskered, Alcathoe or Brandt's. The site has excellent potential and is well maintained by the National Trust team and has every chance of producing an eleventh species.

So the rest of us stayed on in the hope of something a little more special and it wasn't long before we had our sixth species for the night, which turned up in one of the harp traps to the west of the lake. This time we had a Leisler's bat, which turned out to be an excellent and co-operative male. We know from 2009 that Leisler's were using the woodlands to the north of the site, as a female was trapped there (the licence at that point did not cover tagging of Leisler's so she was processed and released).



Our Leisler's bat [Andrew Palmer]

In 2013, we detected Leisler's to the west of the northern section of woodlands and now we know that they also hunt over the lake area, so more data to pass on to the site management.

Lifted by this success, we continued for a couple more hours and just at the point that we had decided to pack up for the night we had a call over the radio from those looking after the mist nets, announcing our 41st bat of the evening... a barbastelle.

Barbastelles have been known to use the site since they were first trapped in 2009 and then again in 2013. We knew they used the Forest in the areas of Street Coppice and the aptly named Colin's Coppice but we had only ever had males. (The team in 2009 had traced some male barbastelles to some hornbeam trees to the east of Elgin Coppice, where lone individuals had been found roosting).

So expectation was running high... had we hit one of the targets and found a female barbastelle? Unfortunately not. It turned out to be another male. Still worth waiting until 2.30am for though. A wonderful bat and a true privilege to see, let alone handle. The bat caused much excitement and pleasure and even in release treated us to a few laps of the processing area before disappearing back into the night. A fine end to the evening.

Totals were as follows: soprano pipistrelle - 16, common pipistrelle - 10, Daubenton's bat - 8, Natterer's bat - 4, brown long-eared bat - 1, Leisler's bat - 1, barbastelle - 1.

It seems only fitting at this stage to add my own tribute to Jan Ragg, who sadly and suddenly passed away recently, leaving us all so shocked and devastated. Jan will be truly missed not only for her expertise in bat care, which can only be stated as second to none, but also for her willingness to share her survey knowledge and analysis skills. Jan organised surveys at Hatfield Forest in 2009 and had encouraged me and helped me no end in preparing the surveys of 2013.



Hatfield barbastelle [Andrew Palmer]

If it were not for Jan the data we have for the site would still be in its infancy. She analysed many of the recordings we gathered and personally took the last known Nathusius' pipistrelle record for the site in 2013, which is the reason we were back there this season.

A true professional, exceptional knowledge, always willing to help, always there to assist any bat in need. I will certainly miss Jan's guidance, reassurance and words of wisdom... she was a special person and a one of a kind.

Weald Bat Project

A report on
2015 by
Graham Hart



Weald wood pasture -
prime bat habitat

The Weald Bat Project is Essex Bat Group's long-term study of Weald Country Park, a 700-year-old, 500 acre (2 km²) country park in South Weald in the borough of Brentwood. The Bat Group has developed a strong partnership with the Ranger Service, allowing access for a number of bat related activities.

The park is primarily a mixture of woodland types alongside traditional wood pasture, rough grassland, lakes and ponds. There are a number of buildings of various ages within the park, a visitor centre, Rangers' houses and a yard. The ancient village of South Weald borders the park, with properties of different ages, a church and pub. A number of country roads encircle the site and beyond these is further open, wooded and hedged countryside.

Weald Bat Project is a flagship project for the Bat Group, training people in the use of bat detectors and recording equipment, helping them learn how to plan and organise surveys (particularly those relating to woodland) and giving everyone an opportunity to take part in an annual seasonal survey programme where volunteers can practice and refine their skills. Individuals are encouraged to go on and set up their own surveys either in Weald or in other parks/areas using the skills they have learnt. The project also delivers workshops on how to assess trees for bat roost potential and use of endoscopes for licence trainees. The data collected will further our understanding of bats in the county, input into site management and help inform the direction of future EBG work throughout the county.

In 2015, Weald Bat Project began trialling the Woodland Bat Survey and Monitoring Protocol (C. Scott, J. Altringham, University of Leeds, 2014). Using a Pettersson D240X time expansion detector borrowed from BCT, we have been able to apply the protocol to a new area in the north of the park not previously surveyed in any systematic way. In March I developed a new transect according to the protocol which is intended to give a reasonable level of detection for certain species after a certain number of visits. The transect involves walking a set route each month with designated stops of a set time. Batclassify was used to analyse the bat calls. This was my first experience with this auto classification software. As a first sweep through an evening's recordings it's a useful time saving option but its accuracy can sometimes be called into question so it pays to double check using traditional methods. The results of the surveys were encouraging with *Myotis*, brown long-eared, common pip, soprano pip, serotine and *Nyctalus* being confirmed present in this area of the park.

In addition to the new transect we have been continuing with surveying bat activity around the lakes, primarily in spring to check on activity around the fishing lake island, where we believe a transient roost of soprano pipistrelles are present, but we have yet to nail down the exact tree. We have learned a lot more about activity around the conservation lake and believe we have also found the locality of a new roost. Thanks to Geoff Clack and Simon Thomas for their efforts here, even though they were there the night of a nearby shooting and had to respond to police enquiries about their reason for being in the woods late that night!

In the autumn we welcomed our Chair, Pat, and his Nathusius' pipistrelle trapping roadshow (aka ENPP). Unfortunately, we didn't get to trap any Nathusius (although we know they are still present at Weald), but everyone who came along got some close views of other species and learned a lot about trapping and different methods in general. Andy Froud and Ketih French from Epping Forest brought their mist nets along on what unfortunately turned out to be a very quiet night indeed.



Trapping at Weald, August 2015
[Photo: Michele Van Veersson]

In the spring we had use of the newly re-vamped visitor centre for a new members' evening, which is proving to be a very popular annual event in the Bat Group's calendar. Weald is an ideal venue, with its access to excellent indoor facilities as well as a lake nearby with plenty of bats to show our new members. In November we had a very entertaining and informative sound analysis workshop and hope to repeat this in the new year. In 2016 we plan to repeat the protocol in another new area of the park, continue with our surveys around the lakes and carry out some more surveys on trees for potential roost features (with more endoscopy to locate roosts). I would like to thank all the regular volunteers and newcomers to the Weald Project who come along and make it such an enjoyable activity. The joy on people's faces at seeing and hearing the bats makes all the planning and effort worthwhile. Special thanks go to the Rangers Justin Ruth and Coral Finch (who are also EBG members). Without their support none of it would happen!

Bat Care News

A meeting of bat carers was held in October to discuss how the network can carry on with its work after the recent sad loss of Jan Ragg, who died in August. Without Jan, the network has some very challenging times ahead but everyone is determined to keep up the high level of care our volunteers have provided in Essex over the years. Co-ordination, information sharing and training were discussed, as was the vexed question of whether we can still cope with baby bats, which require feeding around the clock. One of our greatest needs is for more volunteers, particularly people willing to collect grounded bats from members of the public and deliver them to carers. If you are interested in becoming an 'ambulance driver' or a bat carer, your Bat Group needs you! We will be running an 'introduction to bat care' event in March 2016 for potential volunteers and anyone who wants to find out more about what the network does. In the meantime, anyone who is interested is welcome to contact Steve Donovan at coppeliUSD@yahoo.co.uk.

Essex Woodland Project

EBG Committee would like to thank Essex Recorders' partnership for its grant of £2,935 to purchase static detectors for use in a county-wide woodland bat project.

Intensive woodland surveys may provide our best chance of locating unknown populations of small Myotis (whiskered, Brandt's and Alcahoë bat), as well as investigating other matters such as the Essex distribution of barbastelle and the bat communities of isolated woods, such as those of Tendring and the Southend conurbation. This new project will build on the work carried out at Weald, Epping Forest, Hatfield Forest and other sites, will enable us to compare bat communities between sites and perhaps even guess at why they differ and what can be done to enhance certain sites. Full details will appear in the next edition of the newsletter.

Colchester surveys

Sonya Lindsell describes joint surveys with Colchester Borough Council Ranger Service

Hythe Lagoon, 3rd June 2015 A small group met at 9pm to carry out a preliminary bat survey of Hythe Lagoons, a 17 hectare site owned and managed by Colchester Borough Council, situated between Hythe Quay and Rowhedge. The site is part of the grazing meadow SSSI area along the River Colne. It comprises a number of former dredging lagoons. The dredging ceased in the mid-seventies and it has turned into a valuable haven for wildlife.

No bat data existed for the site, although surveys have been carried out across the river at Essex University and at Wivenhoe Woods, so we knew bats used the adjacent areas. Sunset was at 9.07pm and it was the perfect evening, very calm with clear skies. There was a beautiful sunset as we walked across the site. With it being so near to the summer solstice, a hint of light stayed in the sky all evening.

We walked the sea wall to the bird viewing platform as the sun went down. Along the way we saw many swifts gracefully swirling in the sky above us as we walked; there certainly was a lot of insect food around for them! This boded well for bat sightings. We also caught a glimpse of a barn owl on the edge of the woodland across the river at Wivenhoe. A train went along the Wivenhoe trail and we thought we heard our first bat, or was it interference from the passing train? It was too brief a sound for us to make it out. It was not until 10pm we got our first positive bat sight and sound and from then on we were surrounded by bats, at least ten in close proximity to where we were. The bird viewing platform was renamed the bat viewing platform as it gave wonderful panoramic views over the lagoon, the estuary and the grazing meadows. Bats were flying in from all directions.

The bats were large and flying in a distinctive way, high in a straight line then diving down over open ground. We were picking up calls on the detectors about 20kHz. All this added up to tell us we were watching noctules. They are the biggest British bat, almost twice the size of the pipistrelle and weighing up to 40 grams, their wing span being up to 40cm. They are classified as a 'common and widespread' species. They have a fast flight and often emerge very soon after sunset so they are sometimes mistaken for swifts. We knew they were actively feeding as we could hear the wonderful feeding 'buzz' sound (technically described as the 'blowing a raspberry' sound!) when they caught their prey. As the bat flies we were not that far (a little over three miles) from a known noctule maternity roost in a hollow beech tree on Layer Road (see photo). It could be that some of these bats come across to forage over the lagoon. There is a rough band of green space on the southern edge of Colchester over which they could travel. This area appears to offer plenty of foraging habitat, with areas of parkland, scattered trees, rough grassland and water bodies, including Hythe Lagoons and Abberton Reservoir.

As we continued to watch the bats the evening light was reflecting off the lagoon, silhouetting a pair of swans, black-headed gulls and the various ducks and geese on the lake. The temperature began to drop and a mist started to rise.



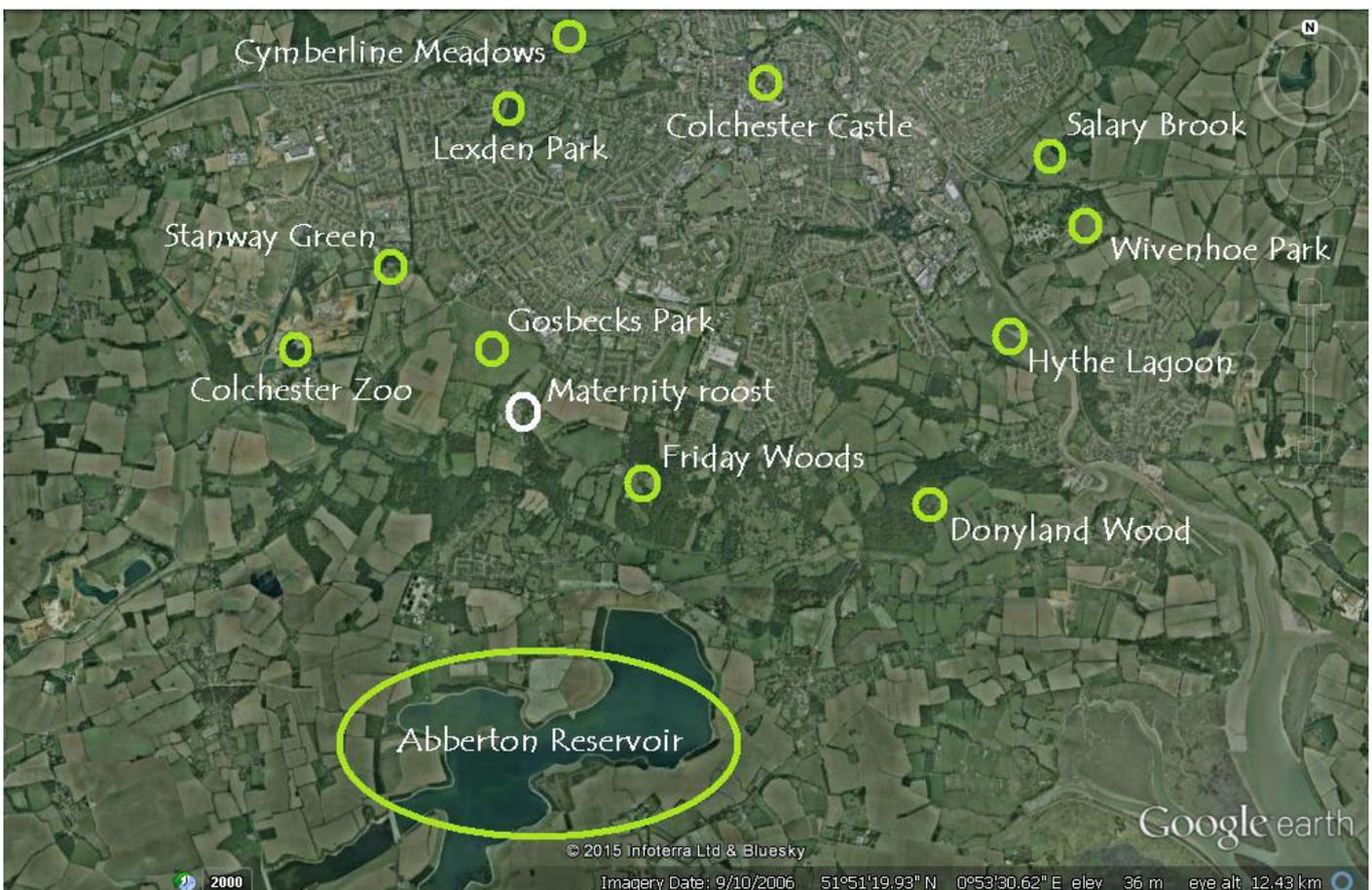
Noctule maternity roost, shared with Daubenton's bats

Soon the cattle in the grazing pasture were covered under a blanket of mist. When we walked from the viewing platform down into the ditch, before climbing again on to the sea wall we could really feel the change in temperature on the lower ground.

It was a full moon and as it rose above Wivenhoe Woods it reflected the orange glow of the sunset and demonstrated the optical illusion of looking huge when so close to the horizon. Looking at the moon using binoculars was amazing. We could see surface craters and other features. We noticed how the moon moves surprisingly quickly up from the horizon. One of the group saw a shooting star - all good reasons to be out after dark every now and then!

By 10.20pm all the noctules had gone and Daubenton's bats started coming in over the lake to feed. They have a totally different foraging technique and fly really low over the water and scoop up midges. There was still enough light for us to see this, which is unusual as normally we would have to try and follow them with a red filtered light (white light would disturb them) to try and see the behaviour. About three were in sight. Daubenton's have a wing span of about 25cm and are known as the 'water bat'. Again they are classified as 'widespread and common'.

By 10.30pm we decided to head back. Once at the industrial buildings at the Hythe we heard our first pipistrelle of the evening, a soprano pipistrelle, peak frequency 55kHz. All in all, it was a very successful and pleasant evening.



This aerial photograph of the Colchester area shows recent records of noctule activity. Most records are of foraging bats and most sites consist of grassland with trees, with large water bodies also used. A fine display of *Nyctalus* aerobatics is almost guaranteed any summer's evening at the Abberton reservoir causeways. It would be interesting to know if these sites are used seasonally by the local noctule population. There are undoubtedly a number of unknown roosts in this area.

Cymbeline Meadows, 22nd July 2015 It's not always bats you have to look out for when carrying out bat surveys, as we found out when monitoring Cymbeline Meadows on the evening of 22nd July. Continuing with the preliminary surveys of some of Colchester Borough Council's wildlife sites, we visited this 74 hectare site, consisting of grazing meadows either side of the River Colne, arable fields, hedgerows and a 7 hectare area of young secondary woodland. The site lies between the Avenue of



Cymbeline Meadows

[Photo: Glyn Baker]

Remembrance to the south and North Station and the railway line to the north. We met at 8.45pm but sunset was not until about 9pm so it was still quite light. As some of the group had not been there before we walked along the river section of the site so they could get a sense of the surrounding area and habitat before it got too dark. There is a circular walk from one bridge to another through the grazing meadows.

Just before we got to the furthestmost bridge we heard our first bats, at 9.30pm. Two noctules came over but we could not really tell from what direction they came. They were circling round and feeding.

Our first conundrum of the evening came as we stood on the bridge and heard bats with a very rapid call which sounded a bit like Daubenton's. We observed them flying low over the water. However, it was not long after sunset and seemed a bit too early in the evening to hear them. They would fly by very fleetingly, so it was hard to be sure that they were not pipistrelles. Subsequent recording analysis showed that they were indeed common pipistrelles. Beyond the bridge was a bend in the river so one member suggested going 'round the corner' to see if we could better observe these bats. This would have been fine if it were not for the police helicopter that then came over and started shining its very powerful spotlight on us!! Second conundrum - to wave or not? We thought it best not to. We found it got quite hard to hear the bat detectors over the sound of the propellers! Luckily a group of ten people standing holding strange electronic devices on the brink of a river bank in the pitch dark did not seem at all odd to the police and they flew off.

As I said, the walk was circular, so after crossing the bridge we headed back along the river, but in the grazing meadows on the opposite side. Grazing meadows is the key word here and in this field were cows (as the ranger for the site I had forgotten to mention this might be a possibility to the group as I didn't think it would be a problem, oops!). So to the third conundrum - to walk through or not? All the cows were sitting down relaxing, chewing the cud, so we decided to walk on through the meadow. We heard bats again so paused, looking and listening, then a member of our group said, 'Errr the cows are running towards us!' It seems cows are very interested to find out what bats share their fields with them too. We were very well behaved humans and stood our ground, facing up to the cows so they stopped running. However, they did insist on following us for quite some time, jostling with each other as they went. One member said 'I can smell their fermented grassy cow breath' or words to that effect. I don't think it was their cow breath we could smell, not after hearing a splattering sound only moments before! It was only when the tallest member of our group shooed them off that they finally got the message that they were not invited on the survey (I was one of the smallest and they didn't really listen to me).

We stopped on the edge of the river when we heard Daubenton's. We had a red filter torch with us so we briefly saw them in the torch light (I say them, there were perhaps 1 or 2). We could hear they were feeding well. This section of the river is quite newly eroded so there are some sheer 'river cliff' banks showing the sandy soil, ideal for kingfisher nest holes. A kingfisher is regularly seen along this section of river. Shining the light into the water we could see shoals of small fish. A couple jumped from the surface, perhaps also going for the insects.

On the walk back to the car park we heard common and soprano pipistrelles.

So what we learnt from the evening is that:

- Noctule, Daubenton's and two pipistrelle species all forage over Cymbeline Meadows.
- It's best to check before going on an evening stroll if there may be cows in the area.
- If you do come across cows send the tallest member of your group to shoo them off.
- Don't wave at police helicopters otherwise they may think you are signaling for help!

Chafford Tunnel Surveys Ella Barnett reports

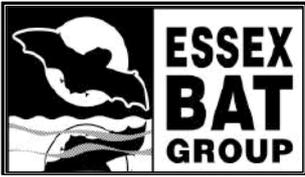


The Chafford tunnel surveys have been carried out for several years but until this year they were only carried out in the winter months; generally two or three times a year between November and March. The tunnels are regularly used by hibernating bats such as common pipistrelles, Daubenton's bats and Natterer's bats. The roosts consist of three tunnels and a bunker, all of which were in use when the area was quarried for chalk from the 18th to mid-20th centuries. The area, which includes Grays Chalk Quarry SSSI, is now part of the Essex Wildlife Trust's Chafford Gorges Nature Park. This year has been the first time that the tunnels have been surveyed throughout the year.

In the winter leading up to the first spring survey a number of the usual suspects were seen with up to 47 bats being counted in all the tunnels in one survey. In February and April an additional species, a brown long-eared bat, was found roosting near to the entrance of one of the tunnels in which it had not been recorded before. This species is rarely found utilising any of the tunnels.

In another tunnel there are six slots which have been specially made in the concrete surrounding to support roosting bats. During the winter the slots were used by up to 23 common pipistrelles. As time went on these numbers reduced and by the middle of June no bats were using these slots. However, in April and May a *Myotis sp.* was found in one of the slots; the first time a species other than a pipistrelle has been recorded using them.

In the months of June and July the only bats found to be using any of the tunnels were a group of Daubenton's bats. In June there were approximately 20 bats within the cluster and in July there were 10. They were in different locations each month and going by the distribution of droppings they have several locations where they roost within the tunnel. It is not known whether this is a maternity roost but next year I am planning to do more surveys during the summer, including evening surveys, to determine whether young are present in the tunnel. To minimise the disturbance to the bats only a few people are able to come along on each survey. If you are interested in coming along then please e-mail me (see Contacts page).



Committee members and other contacts

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Membership Form

You can use this form to renew your membership
or recruit a friend

Send to: Helen Miller, 176 Abbotsbury Road, Morden, SM4 5JS

Name _____ Address _____

Email _____ Telephone _____

Using e-mail means we can send your newsletter and other correspondence electronically. Your e-mail address will not be passed on to any other organisation or used for any other purpose.

How did you hear about EBG? (internet, local bat walk, EWT, friend etc): _____

Please tick as appropriate:

- Standard membership of the group is just £5 for 1 year
 or £12 for 3 years

I would also like to make a donation of £ _____

I enclose a cheque for £ _____ (made payable to Essex Bat Group)

*Your first year's membership will run until 31st December 2016.

To pay your membership by BACS please contact the Treasurer for EBG bank details.