



Newsletter

Autumn
2017

Spreading the Word

Ella Barnett expounds the virtues of our educational work

As part of my volunteering for Essex Bat Group I usually hold stalls, talks and walks throughout the summer. This year, I have also started to attend sessions with Scouting groups, including Rainbows (girls of 5-7 years), Brownies (girls, 7-10), Beavers (boys and girls, 6-8) and Cubs (boys and girls, 8-10). Each group I went to was enthusiastic, energetic and very interested in bats. Sessions consisted of a chat about bats, showing off some permanent captives, batty kids' crafts and sometimes we were even lucky enough to hear bats using detectors and see them flying around in their local area! One of my favourite sessions was in Orsett churchyard, where a few pipistrelle bats were circling around our heads and the kids were 'ooing and ahing' like it was a firework display. I have already got sessions lined up for next year as word of mouth has spread between the groups.



Ella in action at Priory Park, Southend

I have also done a couple of talks this year with local wildlife groups who were keen to find out more information about bats on their local patch. These have extra benefits as not only are you educating people who care for an area of habitat that bats use, but it also inspires them to encourage bats on to their sites. Examples of what's happened this year include the installation of bat boxes and the promise to convert a pill box for hibernating bats.

Stalls at events are a great way of meeting a lot of people with all sorts of knowledge levels about bats. Some don't realise bats exist in this country and some have only heard of fruit and vampire bats, whereas others are very keen on telling you stories of the bats they used to see as a child or in their garden every night. We often take permanent captives so people can see just how small and cute our native bats are. It is very often the first time people have been able to see one up close, whether they are 8 or 80 years old. It is lovely to see how excited children and adults alike are to see a real, live bat (young children often ask if they are real!). Even those people who are unsure about bats often warm to them once they see them in person.

In total this year I have been to over 20 different events and although I have my very reliable and trusted friends that help me out at these events, it is always better to have more hands on deck! Talking to the public can be a bit daunting at first, especially if you're not confident on your bat knowledge, but you probably know more than you think, and you are likely to know more than the average Joe. Helping at these events will serve to help build your knowledge on the world of bats and confidence in relaying your knowledge to members of the public. Although stalls normally run for a whole day you don't always have to commit to the whole event. Although it's always nicer for me and easier in the setting up and taking down of a stall to have someone with me, even if you can only be there for part of the day it would be more than helpful. If you are interested in helping out at stalls or learning more about giving talks or walks then please don't hesitate to contact me at events@essexbatgroup.org.

Deadline for next issue, Winter 2017: 15th January 2018. pathatch@live.co.uk

From Riga to Heybridge

Tim Sapsford on the night *that* bat was caught!

The date was 1st September 2017, it was a warm Friday evening and conditions were good for a night's trapping. I had made the decision to trap at my local site at Chigborough Lakes, an area I know well due to monitoring the bat boxes there. The site is well located, being on the east coast and, therefore, in prime position for migrating bats. The trapping was carried out under the National Nathusius' Pipistrelle Project licence and I was accompanied by my wife Sarah and trainee Roger Watling. I have trapped here on a number of occasions and have caught a few Nathusius males in the past, and have also had a few females in the bat boxes. There are a few new Schwegler 'woodcrete' boxes put up at the site because a Nathusius male was found in one of the old and now very dilapidated wooden boxes a few years ago.



Our Baltic visitor is checked over before being released
{Sarah Sapsford}

We set the traps up on the southern side on Gadwall Lake, which is the smaller of the three main lakes, right on the water's edge, with the acoustic lures pointing out over the water to attract the bats from that direction. We use the standard AT100 directional lures and play a male Nathusius advertisement call. The night started well with a couple of soprano pips, which is often the most abundant species we catch; great for training but not the target species. We then got a common pip, which was useful for showing the differences between the two cryptic species and therefore another good training bat.

By now it was 10.30, and the first Nathusius of the night was caught. Sarah and Roger went to check the traps, they saw a medium-sized bat in the trap and, as they popped it in a holding bag, they noticed that the bat had a ring already on it. This is not all that unusual at Chigborough. The first Nathusius that I ringed there, H9666, has been caught a couple of times and seen each year in the boxes, mostly on his own but once with two females, and was one half of our first confirmed mating roost for the species. So the expectation was that it was this bat again. I got him out of the cotton bag, looked at his ring and I too assumed it was H9666, while also hoping it was not. I then looked at the ring and started to read the number. It said SA6515, I immediately knew it was not any bat I had ringed, but strangely I did not assume it to be foreign, my first thought was "what part of the country have you come from?". I then read the words 'Latvia, Riga' and then it hit me that we had caught a confirmed migrant! To say we were buzzing is a bit of an understatement. One always hopes to catch a ringed migrant, our neighbours in London had caught one the previous Friday, and I can remember being happy for them, but also thinking how great it must be to get one. Well now I know!

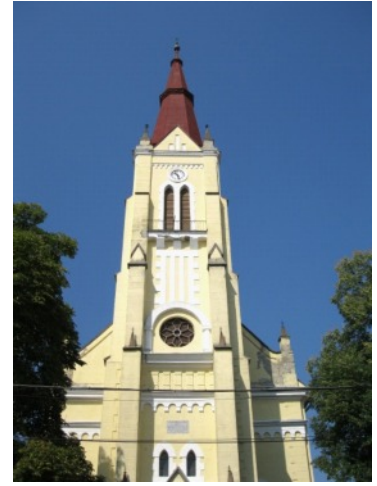
We took some pictures, making sure the ring and the writing on it were visible so we could post it on Facebook and then we let him fly off into the night. We also caught a second male, which I ringed; he may well have made the 1,400km journey too, but we will not know unless he flies back to Latvia and gets trapped again. At the time of writing, six ringed Nathusius from Latvia and Lithuania, both located on the coast of the Baltic Sea, have been caught in southern England. Who knows where or when the next one will turn up. We will wait and see.

The Bats of Hungary & Slovakia

Observations & Anecdotes from a Tour

John Smart on his latest European excursion

I joined a tour group run by the Hungarian tour company 'Ecotours Wildlife Holidays' in August, mainly focusing on bats and other small mammals. There was only one other participant, a very keen mammalogist, Stephen Morgan. Our arrival was staggered at Budapest Airport but we all soon met up and headed for the Bükk and Aggtelek National Parks in the north east of the country bordering Slovakia. Later we visited the Slovakian Karst National Park just across from the Hungarian border.



Several church spires were climbed during the trip!

{John Smart}

These vast National Parks with their valleys, forests and varied habitats are highly suitable for a variety of bat species. By the action of rivers and streams over many millennia they have created over one thousand seven hundred caves in the mountain complex. These are ideal roosting areas for various species of bats in terms of both maternity and winter roosts. Both the Grey Wolf and the Eurasian Lynx roam these National Parks.

During the trip we were to have five mist-net trapping sessions involving two bat specialists who worked their local patches. Mist-nets were placed alongside forest pools and at cave entrances. Some of these trapping sites were at different elevations so the species range reflected their altitude preferences. On two occasions there was a call device playing social calls to attract the bats. The mist-nets used were specifically manufactured for bats with a finer mesh material as that used for bird ringing. Bats chew holes in mist-nets quicker than they can be repaired! There are c.28 bat species in Hungary and Slovakia and we ended up experiencing 21 of them, trapping 19 (10 of which were *Myotis* species). The size range was considerable from the diminutive Common Pipistrelle to the broad-shouldered and broad-winged male Greater Mouse-eared Bat with a wingspan varying of c.450mm.

The Pond Bat in the hand appeared to be a slightly larger version of the Daubenton's, including the large feet, and hawked insects a foot or two above the water in large circles whilst the Daubenton's were flying in straighter directions beneath them. The photogenic Grey Long-eared bat was caught and our bat researcher spoke of both the Long-eared bat species being capable of flying backwards; as seen in flight cages - presumably a necessary skill for a foliage gleaner! And it became evident that as the Dietz and Kiefer handbook points out, the Alcatheo Bat, Brandt's Bat and Bechstein's Bat share the same mature woodland and pond habitat as all three species were trapped together.

Some years ago there had been a colony of Greater Noctules in the area but except for the occasional record they were now absent. The passerine-eating Greater Noctule Bat is the Holy Grail of the European bat world with its patchy distribution and its migratory ways.

Péter, the bat researcher, was collecting parasites from captured bats and committing them to formaldehyde-filled collecting tubes, to help with research into host specific bat parasites and parasites of parasites, including the various fungal fruiting bodies that burst forth from the parasite's body - a micro world of biodiversity where every niche is exploited!



Within a church steeple - a roost of
Greater Mouse-eared Bats
[Stephen Morgan]

Péter also touched upon the autumn moult of the body fur of bats; a time to avoid attaching tracking devices as they could soon come adrift. The observation was made that some bats extracted from the mist-net had their forearms coated with a chalky slurry. This indicated they had recently roosted in a limestone karst cave system.

On the way to the Slovakian Karst National Park we stopped off en route at Eger City in Hungary where a concrete viaduct (see digital) crosses the valley. Here we understood there to be a Noctule Bat roost. Just before

dusk and high above, a gathering of House Martins hawked above the city. But as light fell they disappeared and it was as if there was a change in shifts as Noctules started to emerge from the underside gaps between the concrete columns and the crossbeams. Then we realized that they were also emerging from between the concrete edge beams and the external cladding. It was very difficult to put a figure on the number of bats emerging but the impression gained was that at least 60 Noctules were involved. However, previous research had shown there to be c.350 at the viaduct roost in the autumn and the view expressed was that this was an established migratory roost, on their way from somewhere to somewhere! Some flew around the concrete columns a few times before making off with purposeful flight at considerable speed. Were they exercising their wing muscles and/or assessing their orientation as birds sometimes do? It is of interest to note that the Noctule Bat has a preference to roost in buildings and bridges in their more southerly distribution as opposed to preferring tree holes further north.

One evening we were taken to a Swarming Cave in the Slovakian Karst complex. A mist-net was erected at the cave entrance. Capture started later as presumably the bats were coming in from their roosts elsewhere. Then for the next two hours we constantly trapped bats on a regular basis, initially predominantly Mediterranean Horseshoes but the species range became more and more varied as the night progressed. The bats were visiting to mate and that was evident from the males' excited sexual state! In all, we trapped just over 70 bats of eight species. Past trapping in the cave has caught 21 bat species - thus a cave of great significance. Further into the cave was a metal grille to protect the Swarming Cave from undue disturbance.

The last trapping session was over a forest man-made pool fairly high in the Slovakian Karst forest. Here several Noctules turned up silently in the net alongside the two Mouse-eared bat species and a most welcomed Parti-coloured Bat. Its strikingly long dark brown fur tipped with a silvery-white 'frosting' was very distinctive and fetching. This species had been hoped for!

At various stages we saw Greater Horseshoe, Lesser Horseshoe and Mediterranean Horseshoe Bats roosting in caves and buildings - sometimes hanging motionless on one leg and the latter two species resembling a plum. Although it may not be a 100% reliable ID characteristic, it did appear that the Mediterranean Bat did not usually wrap itself completely around with its wings as the Lesser invariably does. Sometimes the wonderful warbling sound of the two smaller Horseshoe bat species could be heard over the Magenta 5 detector. A captivating sound that in my view is definitely classified as music - birdsong has its competition!

We also visited several churches where, within their spires, were regular bat roosts. Access into the steeple was problematic at times. To gain access into the spire usually involved some narrow unlit stone steps that gave way to several rickety ladders leaning at odd angles. Having come so far to experience bats it somehow strengthened one's resolve to continue the climb! However, the struggle to get to the top was rewarded with viewing bat roosts of varying size and species. The most memorable and exciting event was of a c.300 roost of Greater Mouse-eared Bats (see photo) with several flying circuits around the church loft and only a foot or two from one's head. Disturbingly, the walls of the loft were running alive with bugs and unidentified insects/parasites and I did not look too closely at the four inch thick layer of bat guano! Clearly, there was no lack of biodiversity in this ammonia rich habitat!



Concrete viaduct at Eger city.
Noctules roost in joints between the
column and crossbeams
[Stephen Morgan]

In the Slovakian Karst area, in the Szadelo Valley - Zadiel, there is a winter roost of c.70,000 Common Pipistrelles in a cave complex. These all gather in an area of c.30 square metres! It was initially thought that they had come in from a vast catchment area but research has indicated that they are from a more local distribution. As Common Pipistrelles usually only form nursing colonies of c.100 females in buildings this single winter roost indicates a great number of maternity roosts existing within a relatively small geographical area.

The birds were not ignored and the target species were clinched on the Hortobagy plains with Eastern Imperial Eagle (at great distance!) and several iconic Saker Falcons closer up. Caspian Gulls were in abundance, a very scarce gull species to the shores and landfill sites of the UK. It was a treat to frequently see Turtle Doves and Hawfinches without having to fill in a rarity form! In the Slovakian Karst we came across the bulky Ural Owl enjoying a year where mammals in the forest clearings and meadows were in abundance. 2017 has been a good year for the mammal hunters!

The region that we visited is superb for its butterflies. Thirty one species in all were identified including the wonderful Pale Clouded Yellow, Duke of Burgundy, Glanville Fritillary, Queen of Spain Fritillary, Camberwell Beauty, Woodland Grayling, Map and the apt named Hungarian Glider - mostly all new to me. Silver-washed Fritillaries were in abundance over most of the meadows and along woodland edges! One is lucky to see one or two in Essex every year!

Other mammals recorded of note were the European Hamster (difficult to see in the late evening as they are so predator-wary), the Common Souslik, a ground squirrel and several slumbering dormice species including the very cute Forest Dormouse was encountered!

Thanks must go to István Bárlot of 'Eco Tours', our naturalist and mentor who led the trip for the seven days in a seamless way from start to finish and thanks to the two bat researchers Péter Estók and Štefan Matiz for their fieldcraft expertize and their deep understanding of bat ecology. Thanks also to Attila, a National Park Ranger, for his in-depth knowledge of the specific nature rich areas to explore. And thanks to Stephen Morgan for good company throughout. Reference has been made to the 'Bats of Britain and Europe' by Christian Dietz and Andreas Kiefer - Bloomsbury Press - 2016. Any errors are mine.



Committee members and other contacts



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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

Yes, I would love to become a member of EBG for 2017*/ 2018 / 2019 (delete as appropriate)

Name Address

Email Telephone

Using e-mail means we can send your newsletter and correspondence electronically, saving on postage and stationery so more of your membership money is used for bat conservation. 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

Group / organisation membership is available for a minimum subscription of £30

I would also like to make a donation of £_____

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

If you wish to pay by BACS please contact Helen at membership@essexbatgroup.org