

Newsletter Summer 2017

Growth, Evolution and Success

On the evening of Friday 1st September, a ringed Nathusius' pipistrelle was caught in a harp trap at Chigborough Lakes, Maldon, providing the first proof of migration between continental Europe and Essex. The bat was ringed in Latvia on 23rd August 2016. This fantastic find marks the achievement of a major objective for Essex Nathusius' Pipistrelle Project and a significant contribution to the national study of this species. It is the fifth time during the first few years of the study that a bat ringed in the Baltic area has been recovered in south east England, the other recaptures being in Kent, Sussex and Hertfordshire. Recent finds of Nathusius' pipistrelles on offshore wind turbines off Clacton and in the Thames estuary, and older records from North Sea oil rigs, suggest that bats migrate across the North Sea as well as the narrower eastern end of the English Channel. Our next objective is to investigate possible migration along the River Thames by trapping at water bodies close to the northern shore of the river and to find out if this species breeds in Essex by radio-tracking females in the spring in the hope of locating maternity roosts.



Nathusius' pipistrelle, ringed at Weald Country Park, Brentwood
[Andrew Palmer]

Meanwhile, our woodland project continues to expand the known distribution of barbastelle, with recent finds south of Maldon and at Lingwood Common and Danbury Country Park. This species still eludes us in the far south, but the search goes on. Our new survey project at Thorndon Country Park, Brentwood, is making a concerted effort to find this species and static detectors will again be deployed at other southern sites.

Reaching the end of its second year, the woodland study is about to evolve from a largely detector-based survey into one which includes trapping and radio tracking so that we can take on the issue of the so-called small Myotis species or 'WABs' - attempting to establish whether or not whiskered bat, Alcaho bat and Brandt's bat occur in Essex. We have the option of joining an existing project currently operating in several counties, trapping for these species and radio tracking to find roosts. Alternatively, we may seek our own licence, to include barbastelle as well as small Myotis, in the hope of finding breeding colonies of the former.



A male barbastelle, Hatfield Forest
[Andrew Palmer]

Searching for WABs will involve trapping sessions at potential 'autumn swarming' sites, the identification of which would also be quite an achievement for us, as we currently know of few such sites in Essex. Possibilities include hibernation tunnels and deneholes in Thurrock, ice houses and church crypts. Our new venture will also involve a return to Hatfield Forest, which is deserving of a project in its own right, and trapping at other wooded sites across the county.

Advice Service Under Threat



Your Chair and Newsletter Editor uses his position to sound off about forthcoming changes to the Voluntary Bat Roost Visitor service

Natural England recently announced that it intends to make changes to its Voluntary Bat Roost Visitor scheme, under which householders and churches can obtain free advice on planned work which may affect bat roosts. Several licensed EBG members work as volunteers for this scheme, which is administered by the Bat Conservation Trust on behalf of Natural England. Volunteers carry out site visits at the request of BCT and assess whether bat roosts are likely to be affected and what can be done to avoid or minimise impacts. In Essex, this work is particularly important in terms of conserving bat roosts in old churches.

The Bat Group has a good relationship with the local Church of England authorities. Lists of planned work are sent to our Joint Secretaries, who highlight those which may affect bat roosts if present. The relevant churches are then requested to arrange a bat survey, which is organised between BCT, the church and a local VBRV volunteer.

Natural England has yet to announce details of its intentions, but they are highly likely to include a significant curtailment of the service in some form. Essex Bat Group and its VBRV volunteers will make their views known, as will many others, including the BCT. However, the prospects of this making any difference to the outcome are not promising.

The fact that we in Essex appreciate the importance of old churches to local bat populations is evident in the increasing effort we put into working with church folk and researching bat use of the historic places of worship which they care for. Our Remote Roost Monitoring Project is specifically designed to aid this research, using a static detector to monitor bat activity inside churches over an extended period. It has already found possible 'swarming' activity at a church crypt, as well as recording barbastelle at another site.

We also run more events for churches than ever before. Our well attended talks, generally followed by watching bats emerge at dusk inside or outside the church, are a great way of reaching and informing people whose opinion of bats matters a great deal.

Research and educational work is important, but protecting roosts is key. If Natural England pulls the plug on the free advice service, or does anything that reduces its effectiveness, it will be acting against bat conservation. There is a serious risk that bat roosts will be lost and bats unintentionally killed during work to churches and other buildings as a result. [Pat Hatch]

If you would like to help with the work we do with churches please let us know. Volunteers willing to give talks are always needed. We just about manage to cover the talks we are invited to do, but having more available speakers would enable us to take a more pro-active approach. Please also get in touch if you are willing to deploy an SM3 detector in a local church. The detectors are left in place for up to a week. We can provide contacts for most churches and you will be shown how to position and operate the detector.

Bats of Forgotten Gardens



The Gardens of Easton Lodge is a beautiful site near Great Dunmow, the lost gardens of a large country house, lovingly restored by a band of dedicated volunteers. The trustees got in touch with the Bat Group in the spring to say they wanted to know what bats they had and we were invited to visit one evening to see what we could find.

One night in June, a few of us went along with detectors, met the very friendly and hospitable trustees, drank their tea and ate their biscuits. We strapped two of our static BatLogger detectors to trees and had a guided tour of the site, with its grassland surrounded by trees, ornamental pond, small lakes and large, walled kitchen garden. Some before and after photos bore witness to the hard work put in by the volunteers.

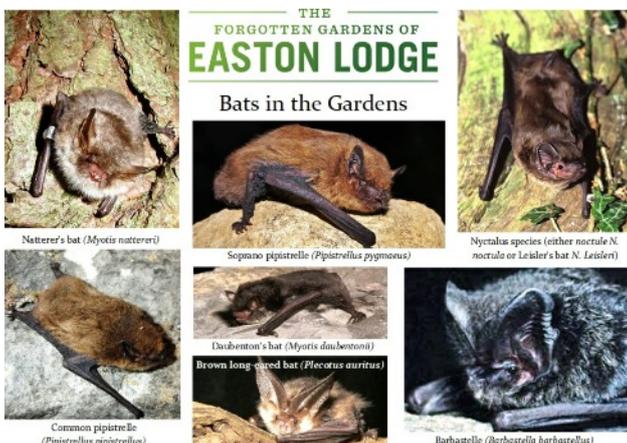
Things were looking good from the bat point of view; plenty of large old oaks, lots of woodland edge, water bodies surrounded by trees but large enough to allow enough sunlight in to encourage a lush growth of marginal emergent vegetation. There were barbastelle records from the local area, potential bat food items were flying around us and night was falling.

As is often the way, small pipistrelles were first on the scene - common and soprano - foraging around us, obligingly demonstrating the 'feeding buzz' for our hosts. We didn't seem to be picking up Daubenton's bat at the lake, but a slow wander back across the site brought us a suspected brown long-eared bat, later confirmed by computer analysis of recordings, and our much anticipated barbastelle, several clearly identifiable calls, passing through an area of open grass with trees. Five days later I retrieved the static detectors and analysis of the recordings added another three species to the list - Daubenton's, Natterer's bat and a *Nyctalus* species - either noctule or Leisler's bat, or both.

Frances Donovan recounts an enjoyable day running a bat stall at the Gardens...

When people think of visiting The Forgotten Gardens of Easton Lodge it is usually to see the amazing display of snowdrops in February. It is one of those places we have kept meaning to go to but never got around to, so we were really pleased when Pat asked us to man a stall at their open day on 20th August, to tell their visitors about the bats of the gardens.

The trustees were really excited to have such a diverse selection of bats and had never imagined they would have so many. They had put together a poster of "their" bats, which we



were able to display in the gazebo. The event had even been advertised with a bat theme, plus the children's activities. A few hundred members of the public visited our stall throughout the day and were really fascinated with all things batty, especially the permanent captives which we had taken along for the day. It was a superb experience, with great hospitality from the trustees and volunteers; we have been asked to return next year, something we really look forward to.

Bat Caves of Bulgaria

John Smart reports on his recent trip to central Europe

I travelled with 'Wild Echo', a Bulgarian nature tour company. The tour was expertly led by bat researcher Antonia Hubancheva. Antonia studies bat ecology at the Siemers Bat Research Station in northern Bulgaria and is currently working on her PhD and has worked with the bat guru Merlin Tuttle on several projects. Thankfully, the tour company decided to run the trip even though there were only myself and Phil Riddett from Kent Bat Group as clients.

There was no trapping involved and entering into caves was limited to avoid disturbance to the bat roosts. Species identification was by a combination of Antonia's Pettersson bat detector, feeding behaviour and roost inspections. All the bat species encountered are known to be well represented at the various locations that we visited.

Over the millennia, there have been c.5400 water hewn caves created in the limestone mountains of Bulgaria, mainly in the Rhodopes, part of which form an extensive area of the European rewilding network. Additionally, many smaller areas form part of the 'Natura 2000' patchwork of sites across the European landmass. The Rhodopes are an extensive area of mountains rather than a chain and extends south into Greece. With the remoter areas of the country still farmed in the traditional way, despite being a member of the EU, wildlife populations are buoyant and bats are no exception. Bulgaria has c.33 bat species to the UK's c.18. The eight day tour, commencing and ending in Sofia, took in Dobroston, Madzharovo (a very good birdwatching area), Krumovgrad and the spectacular limestone gorges of Trigrad near to the Greek border, all in a clockwise route.

Near Dobroston: One of the first bat caves to be visited was only a short drive from where we were based for a couple of nights at a hotel in Dobroston. Across from pastureland and at the edge of forest was a wide neck of a cave with unmelted snow near to its base. Here we sat as darkness fell and soon bats started to emerge in goodly numbers. Most noticeable were the Great and Lesser Mouse-eared Bats, powerful flyers, with their white bellies picked out in the dim torchlight. With them were many Schreibers's Bent-winged Bats and Long-fingered Bats. A great introduction to what the trip had to offer! Some of the bats lingered about the cliff face above, presumably hunting, before disappearing into the gloom of night.

At Madzharovo (135m asl), with its tall limestone cliffs and a wide and slow moving meandering river below, we approached a small cave by the roadside. In the gloom we could see a lone Lesser Horseshoe Bat doing a repeated circuit, flying close to the fern dotted wall and stony floor and presumably hunting insects and surface mini-beasties before doubling back for a rerun. This routine went on for several minutes, giving us good views. It was here that the Magenta 5 recorded its captivating and delicate music-like echolocation calls - at a warbling and ephemeral 110 kHz. Then as the light finally fell we sat by the river and recorded the several bat species of different sizes criss-crossing the water's glass smooth surface. Bat species known to occur here are the Greater and Lesser Horseshoe Bats, Daubenton's Bat, Geoffroy's Bat, Savi's, Pygmy and Common Pipistrelles.

In the Madzharovo area, amongst dense scrub, is a subterranean concrete reservoir. Basically a large hollow cube with internal sides of c.30ft. It was empty of water and it was also empty of the enormous roost of Geoffroy's Bats that can occur there at this time of year. The cliché, 'Nature is not a Zoo' sprang to mind!

That day we had visited the 'Nature Conservation Centre for the Eastern Rhodopes' that focuses on vulture conservation, run by its dedicated staff. We learnt of their work by using geolocators attached to the birds to see exactly where they migrated to and where they were most vulnerable to shooting and poisoning. Egypt, in this case, was the villain of the piece. Replacement of losses is on a knife edge even though there are feeding stations in Bulgaria to supplement their diet.



A bat roost at the Samara Cave

The Back of Beyond: Whilst at Krumovgrad, a 'Natura 2000' worker contacted us and volunteered to take us to a cave bat roost near the remote village of Ribino called the Samara Cave (390m asl). A one hour organ juggling journey by a 4x4 over rough tracks! Stopping by an isolated farmhouse to check for directions, the occupants, who only see a stranger perhaps once a month, thought that we were the Russians! Eventually we arrived and then after scrambling down a rock and scrub covered steep incline we entered the cave by about 10 metres to witness a roost. A little later we sat across from the cave entrance and its little stream to experience the bat emergence. Later analysis by Antonia of the roost photographs revealed that the species involved were c.500 Schrieber's Bent-winged Bats, c.50 Greater/Lesser Mouse-eared Bats, 5 Blasius's and/or Mediterranean Horseshoe Bats.

Trigrad: The highlight of the trip was the visit to the Trigrad Gorge (1277m asl), as pictured below, where the limestone gorge walls tower above with black pine clinging precariously to cracks in the rock face and ledges. Here a visit to the Devil's Throat cave as a tourist is a humbling experience as you walk through a vast cathedral-like cave system, 208 steps below the surface, with its raging and roaring mountain meltwater disappearing into the bowels of the earth. Small roosts of bats could be seen tucked into the folds of the cave walls high above as we made our way through. But it was in the late evening that the Devil's Throat revealed its treasure. As dusk fell, bats of several species, in goodly numbers, mostly Schreibers's Bent-winged Bats along with a smaller entourage of Long-fingered Bats, Noctules, Savi's Pipistrelles and Whiskered Bats emerged all flying vertically up and sometimes through the spray. Not all these species are cave roosting bats but probably emerged from the cracks and crevices in the upper rock face. This was when several chunky sized Greater Mouse-eared Bats flew close by me and up into the fading evening sky. Meanwhile, my humble Magenta 5 bat detector was working its way towards a cardiac arrest!

I was reminded of the diagram in 'Bats of Britain and Europe' by Dietz & Keifer that shows an extensive cave network and the areas where different species of bats prefer to roost according to the temperature and humidity. All this was now a reality far below our feet. Apart from an internal clock, how do bats at the far end of deep, distant, permanently dark, twisty and atmospherically unchanging galleries know it's time to emerge?



On another evening whilst in the Trigrad area, we sat by a slow moving river where several bat species were feeding over the smooth water surface. Here Antonia recorded a Greater Noctule Bat, a species that is known to be in the area.

Bird Life: Bulgaria is very rich in bird life, especially at coastal areas and at inland marshes. The mountains and upper valleys are less diverse for bird species but offer specialities such as Griffon and Egyptian Vultures, various birds of prey from eagles to falcons, the elusive Wallcreeper (looked for but not encountered), Crag Martins, Red-rumped Swallows, Alpine Swifts and the confiding Rock Nuthatch. Also, not to forget are the Black Storks, White Storks, Bee-eaters, Golden Orioles, Turtle Doves and the Hoopoes of the lower elevations.

On the last day, whilst driving along the plain towards Sofia and its airport we took a break just off the motorway. Casually scanning a lone oak tree nearby, I was aware of an unfamiliar bird perched on a bare branch but soon realized that it was a Levant Sparrowhawk, an ambush predator that by its secretive and stealthy ways, is difficult to come across. It took off and gave good views as it headed off into scrub. UK birders consider this as a target species!

Then it was time to complete our journey to Sofia airport, say our goodbyes and return by British Airways to Heathrow Airport. But the bats and the birds, the mountain landscapes and the black pine filled valleys will not be forgotten.

Thanks to Antonia Hubancheva for leading the tour, her in-depth knowledge of bat ecology, her untiring energy and humour and for checking this article. However, any errors are mine and mine alone.

Species List of Bats Encountered:- Daubenton's Bat, European Free-tailed Bat, Geoffroy's Bat, Greater, Lesser and Blasius's/Mediterranean Horseshoe Bat, Long-fingered Bat, Greater and Lesser Mouse-eared Bat, Noctule, Greater Noctule, Parti-coloured Bat, Common, Soprano and Savi's Pipistrelle, Schreiber's Bent-winged Bat, Serotine and Whiskered Bat (under taxonomic investigation in this region).

Postscript:-

There's an hotel in Krumovgrad, whose raised courtyard is a curious mix of stairs and landings at different levels that almost defy logic. The architect must have been gifted with an inventive imagination! I was reminded of the drawings of M.C. Escher where impossible staircases play havoc with perspective!

News in brief

The EBG Committee would like to thank Allan Sheehy and Billericay Lions for their recent generous donation of £400. We have decided to use the money to buy some bat boxes and install them at a site near Billericay. We hope that members of the local community will be able to join us on future box checks to learn about bats, wildlife and the local environment in line with the aims of Lions International and the local Lions Clubs.

A group of several adjacent farms on the Suffolk border will be the location for a series of joint bat surveys run by Essex and Suffolk Bat Groups. The land owners are conservation-orientated and keen to know which bat species occur at their sites and what they can do to enhance their habitats.

Thanks to funding from Essex Recorders' partnership, we have recently taken delivery of some new detectors for use by others as part of Essex Community Bat Survey (see Spring 2017 Newsletter). If you or your organisation are interested in taking part, please contact Pat for details.



Committee members and other contacts



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Other Contacts

Bat Care Network (to report a grounded bat): See EBG website for contact phone numbers

Bat Care Network (other enquiries): batcare@essexbatgroup.org

Hanningfield Roost Counts: hannersbats@gmail.com

Woodland Project: woodlandbats@essexbatgroup.org

Weald Project/Thorndon Project: thehart@btinternet.com

Nathusius' Pipistrelle Project: pathatch@live.co.uk

Other enquiries: enquiries@essexbatgroup.org

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