

A guided bat walk in Stockgrove Country Park

Jude Hirstwood



Stockgrove Country Park lies north west of Heath & Reach on the Great Brickhill Road. The bat group has been monitoring here for 16 years. With over 80 acres of heath, ancient coppice and coniferous plantation, this is an excellent place to see bats. Even if you know nothing about bats at the moment, it won't be the case for long.

As I explained in the last issue, my involvement in the Bat Group began as a matter "if you can't beat 'em join them" as Bob was heavily infested with the bat bug. Watching more "expert" members using bat detectors, identifying bats in flight and knowing where to look when spotting



potential roosts from a distance was quite daunting. But I soon learnt that you can pick up the basics quite quickly - certainly enough to be useful rather than a liability. Most important of all, no one minds when you confess your total ignorance. It also gives you an ideal reason for going for an evening walk. The understorey in this wood is minimal, so

you don't spend the evening cursing as you blunder into another set of brambles or nettles.

For the last 16 years, the bat group has monitored summer bat activity in the park by following a predetermined route. You know, if you read Bob's article on tree roosts, that bats change dwelling frequently, so

this is a bit like buying the same lottery ticket every week – you never know when you will be lucky. Though it must be said that the probability of spotting something is considerably higher than winning the lottery.

To the woods to the woods

Walking from the car park into **Baker's Wood**, the first



stop is a **Noctule** roost in a green woodpecker hole. This is on a slope and from the path you get an excellent view of emerging bats. Shining a torch into the hole you can see whether the roost is occupied. A third of the time that some one is in, that occupant a bat or bats and the other two thirds it is an irate green woodpecker, who usually flies off

squawking indignantly. Sometimes the roost is deserted



Heading up one of the medieval wood banks, you come to a series of trees with woodpecker holes, at least two of which have been used by **Daubenton's** (See the 1st photo in the tree roost article) Crossing Bakers Wood you come to a **brown long eared** roost,) and in the pine plantation at the lakeside, a climb up a steepish hill brings you to

some bat boxes.

(These often have more **brown long eareds** in them. If they are in, then you'll stop and count them out. It's not unusual to



find 15-20 of them in a single box. This is something you can do even if you wouldn't recognise a long eared if it waved its ears at you.

It is at about this time that the first **pipistrelles** of the evening come swooping through the trees. With a bat detector it is quite easy to identify what sort it is, but you can enjoy watching it without knowing its precise identification.

A little later you can stand above the lake and look down through the trees to watch the **noctules** fly by.



4. A new recruit for the hard-pressed crew. Actually it is only fotherington-tomas you kno he sa Hulle clouds hullo sky he is a girle and love the scents and sounds of nature tho the less i smell and hear them the better.

When you finally tear yourself away from the Fotherington-Thomas ness of the moment you head towards the lake, pausing to check **noctule** and **Daubenton's** roosts

No matter how experienced you are bats can still surprise you. Phil Irving, a ranger at Stockgrove, tells a story of leading a bat walk for some children. He had pointed out the green woodpecker holes in Baker's Wood and one child drew his attention to a hole at waist height in a tree and asked if that was a bat roost. Phil said it was unlikely as it wasn't very high

up the trunk, but when he checked he found that it was indeed a roost. See just how quickly you can be useful?

The Lake

Finally you reach the lake (If you've arrived too late for the woodland walk part you can join at this point as it is a few minutes attention walk along the (flat) path from the car

park). On the edge of a lake sheltered by the surrounding hills are the remains of a structure called the boathouse. This was burnt down in 1963 and its brick arches are all that remains The Kroyer-Kielburg family who owned the estate used to come here to eat Spare a thought for the staff who had to trundle meals down to them. Maybe they did a spot of bat watching on the way. By the time we get here the ducks (including some very pretty mandarins) are making themselves scarce before being overshadowed by the arrival of the bats.

Cabaret time

Early on the **pipistrelles** drop by Later, if you are lucky, you will see **noctules** "hawking" over the water - hunting insects on the wing while flying back and forwards across the water - and squabbling amongst



themselves Then as the light fades it's the turn of the **Daubenton's**. Think Dam Busters Think Dam Busters in Reverse. They come in low over the water. On a time expansion bat detector you can hear the feeding buzz followed by the "slurp" as they scoop up insects with their large feet.

Fifteen minutes after sunset, a bright torch is turned on and shone across the lake from a fixed point. The number of bats crossing the beam over a five-minute period is recorded.

As night falls, it's back to the cars. You may well have seen herons the lake side, heard owls hooting in the woodland and now, as night falls on a warm summer evening, the resinous scent of pines will guide you back to the cars and from there me hap to the local hostelry If you want to see for yourself, we meet at the car park *Photos© Bob Cornes & Jude Hirstwood*

Editor's Note

Since I wrote this article in 2005 we have continued to monitor this site and have recorded barbastelles there. In July 2011 the park introduced parking charges and closed the car park at 9pm. IN orde that we can continue monitoring we will be able to park a LIMITED number of cars outside.

We have always welcomed non members but under this new arrangement you will need to contact at batsinbeds@fsmail.net so that we know to expect you, and can tell you if there are any car parking spaces.