

Nature Notes.

Bats in Bugbrooke

Bugbrooke is described by Phil Richardson, the Bat Recorder for the Northamptonshire Wildlife Trust, as a “very batty place”. He has made a study of Bugbrooke bats and has found that there are 5 kinds living here. There are 2 kinds of Pipistrelle bats, the Common Pipistrelle and the Soprano Pipistrelle, Daubenton’s bat, the Brown Long-eared bat and the Noctule.

Bats are mammals, meaning that they give birth to live young (normally one a year in June, but not every year) which are fed with their mother’s milk until they are able to hunt for themselves. From dusk to dawn they feed on small flying insects such as midges and moths and commercially bats are encouraged to help protect crops of leaf vegetables by their predation of damaging insects. During the daylight hours they sleep in roosts.

Different bats prefer different places to roost. The Pipistrelle bats are likely to be found in spaces behind wood cladding and soffits in modern houses or in abandoned woodpecker holes and small cracks in trees where rot has set in. Daubenton’s bats roost in trees too (in the churchyard), but they also like arches where they can find holes in the brick work. The Brown Long-eared bat prefers roof spaces in older buildings. The Noctule tends to roost in tree holes.

Many people have put bat boxes in their gardens to encourage bats to roost there. Bats take to artificial homes less readily than do birds, but you are more likely to attract them if you have a few boxes with differing aspects and design. Put them close to a hedge or tree-line as they use these to help them navigate back to their home, and at least 4 metres above the ground for security and exposing them to the warmth of the sun. Droppings and urine stains around the lower parts of the box are signs of occupation and if there is more than one bat, you may hear chittering on warm afternoons. If you do get a resident, you must remember that bats are protected by law because of their dramatic decline in recent years, and no disturbance is allowed without a special license. However, bat boxes are no substitute for their natural habitat and conservation of the environment is the best way to help bats. When habitats are destroyed, they are gone forever along with the bio-diversity they support. So little is understood about bats, that we may not appreciate the casual damage we do.

The rules for making a bat-friendly garden are the same as for other wildlife. Pesticide use should be minimal, and choose a range of native plants and trees that our native insects enjoy. A variety of flowers, vegetables, hedges, trees and especially a pond is desirable. There is an excellent free booklet available from the Bat Conservation Trust called *Encouraging bats* which gives tips, and you can get by calling 0845 1300 228.

This year I am asking people to do the first Bugbrooke Bat Survey to coincide with the Bat Conservation Trust national survey. The survey period finishes 15th August and all you do is look for bats flying around your garden just after dusk, (the sunset survey) or you can get up before dawn to see bats “swarming” back to their roosts (the sunrise survey). There is more information, including a bat fact sheet online at www.bugbrookelink.co.uk/naturenotes. Also, survey forms and fact sheets are available at Petstop. By making annual records we can assess the health of our bat population, and see whether it is increasing or in decline. Even if you don’t see bats, please let me know, as then we can plot where they are and where they are not.

Recent sighting: An otter has been seen in the brook. Natural England was not surprised!

This month the Swifts will be leaving for their winter home in Africa. They spend quite a short time here as they arrive in the first half of May and are all gone by the middle of August.