

Leisure

Attenborough Nature Notes *by Tim Sexton*

IT is a little-known fact that this weekend (August 28-29) is European Bat Weekend, an annual celebration of bats organised by The Bat Conservation Trust.

With seven of the UK's 17 breeding bat species recorded at Attenborough Nature Reserve, news of the forthcoming bat celebration spurred me on to dust off my bat detector and go out looking for some of Attenborough's rarely seen nocturnal mammals. Following a few nights of heavy rain, the clear sky forecast for last Monday was sure to attract large numbers of hungry bats that would have been unable to feed during the bad weather. Despite a strong wind (and a heavy downpour half an hour

before leaving the house), I was not disappointed.

Just after dusk and only ten minutes after arriving on the reserve, my bat detector started to make some strange sounds that sounded like wet slaps. Without the detector, they were inaudible to the human ear. These 'wet slaps' were the sonar calls made by my first bat of the night, a Common pipistrelle. This is Britain's commonest bat. It weighs just 5g (less than a 2p coin) and is one of the smallest. In spite of its size, however, the pipistrelle's voracious appetite means it can consume around 3,000 insects a night!

A few minutes later, after tuning the detector to a different frequency, a Noctule bat – one of the largest

species in Britain – could be heard as it cruised along its feeding path over The Bund. Its characteristic 'chip chop' call was replaced regularly with a series of ever-increasing clicking sounds as the bat homed in on its insect prey.

With the going good, I moved to the Works Pond bridge. Here, the sounds coming from the bat detector became hard to distinguish, as large numbers of pipistrelles and Noctule bats fed over the pond and along the marginal vegetation. All of a sudden, the higher frequency call of a Soprano pipistrelle came in to range as it joined the feeding foray. The Soprano pipistrelle is so similar to the Common pipistrelle that it was only

identified as a separate species in 1990.

As I walked through the reserve towards the nature centre, bats could be heard from all directions. Even in Attenborough village, Common pipistrelles could be seen patrolling the streetlamp-lit roads. Over Coneries Pond (the pond that surrounds the nature centre) I encountered my final species of the night, the rare Nathusius' pipistrelle, first recorded in Nottinghamshire at Attenborough Nature Reserve in 2006. What a way to end a very exciting night bat detecting!

How you can get involved

September is one of the best times of the year to go out looking for bats. Numbers will have increased from mid-July through to August as juvenile bats born in June start to fly. It is also the start of the mating season for next year's

brood, so many males will be flying around and using their special mating calls to attract a female. September is also the time when bats begin to build up their fat reserves to see them through the winter.

If you're looking for a place to start, a basic bat detector will help you get the most out of bat watching and will help with correct identification. You can purchase a heterodyne detector from the nature centre for just £69. These detectors change the ultrasonic sounds emitted by bats into sounds that we can hear and can be tuned to the frequency of ultrasound used by different species.

If you are a complete novice, you may want to attend an organised bat walk. Bat groups run a number of events each year throughout the county, including here at the nature reserve. The next bat walk will be held at Martin's Pond near Wollaton Park on September 16 at 7pm.

More details can be found on our website.

If you would like to help the Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust reverse the decline of bats in the county, perhaps you could adopt a Brown long-eared bat. Under threat from roost damage during building works, winter hibernation disturbance, chemical timber treatments, floodlighting and wind turbines, these little creatures need your support. For more details, contact the Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust on (0115) 958 8242.

Wildlife Watching

Local news and views of the natural world

Our local ecologist, Jack Smith, gives his views on government cuts

IT was perhaps inevitable that, in the process of seeking deep spending cuts, the coalition government would set its sights on wildlife conservation and the environment. These are areas which might seem – in comparison with issues such as education and care for the elderly – relatively soft targets, despite their high public profile and the government's claim to be the 'greenest ever'.

DEFRA, the government department that controls the majority of spending on conservation and the environment, has been asked by the government to set out plans for a 40 per cent cut in its budget. This has resulted in some alarming proposals, such as selling off National Nature

Reserves, privatising the Met Office (a world leader in research on climate change), privatising part of the Forestry Commission and withdrawing grants to British Waterways. There are also concerns that the Environment Minister's commitment to maintain flood defence spending at current levels means that the Environment Agency will have to make even deeper cuts in its budget for pollution control and river protection.

Perhaps more worrying is the reduction of knowledge and expertise available to the government. More than 30 environmental advisory groups have already been abolished and it is expected that many more will be severely reduced or disbanded if the government insists on 40 per cent cuts. Natural

England, which is already seen as having reduced specialist knowledge since it replaced English Nature, has announced plans for 400 redundancies next year and another 400 after that. This would amount to a third of their current personnel.

The depth of concern is such that 25 leading conservation groups, including the RSPB, have made a joint statement to the government saying that the cuts "could have profound and perhaps irreversible consequences for wildlife, landscapes and people". The statement also asserts that this would be a "false economy – short-term savings would translate into huge long-term costs for our economy and our national wellbeing". Some of these costs could result from the UK being prosecuted and fined for breaching conservation regulations under the European Birds and Habitats Directives.

There are some observers who would contend that the whole purpose of demanding that government departments identify areas where they can make huge cuts in spending is to induce

fear and trepidation, which will turn to relief when the actual cuts are announced. There is also the suspicion that the dominant party in the government coalition is using the issue of the budget deficit as an excuse to push through policies that it would have implemented anyway. It is hard to think of a time when that party did not have a policy of cutting public spending and one could claim that they 'invented' privatisation in this country.

Where government spending is allocated, it will continue to be about choices. It would appear

that the choice has been made that a possible improvement in the nation's credit rating will have to be paid for with a permanent degradation the quality of its environment – with serious consequences for wildlife conservation. How many people who put their cross against a Conservative or Lib Dem candidate in the last general election were aware that they were voting for this outcome?

Better news on the local political front is the declaration by our new MP, Anna Soubry, in the last issue of the Express, that she will oppose open-cast

mining at Cossall. This continues the position taken by her predecessor, Nick Palmer, as long ago as his initial election in 1997. Since then Cossall has been spared in the expansion of open-cast coal mining, which has blighted other parts of the country. Let's hope that Ms Soubry can be as successful as Nick Palmer on this issue and that she will be able to emulate, or even improve on, his achievements in wildlife and environmental protection within the Broxtowe constituency.

*Jack Smith
Local ecologist*



Thought for the Fortnight

Irish proverb

A good laugh and a long sleep are the best cures in the doctor's book

