



BATS

In order to understand more about bats on the Hurst, a project was set up in 2012. Thanks to a grant from the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment (TOE), a team of local volunteers set up some bat boxes and acquired a bat detector and a small recording unit. That was the easy part. The picture shows one of the bat boxes on the Hurst.



It was possible to hear and record the bats' echo-location calls but we could not tell which species they were and no bats occupied the boxes. The team had a lot to learn before they could provide useful information about the species present on the Hurst and how abundant they were. But the Hurst, lying between the River Thames and the Overy mill race, and the Old Bridge Meadow is a good place to start.

Identifying bat calls by ear requires a lot of experience. On the bat detector, calls sound like rapid slaps, smacks, chips, or clicks. One call may last from 0.2 to 100 msec, according to species and the type of call. Alternatively, the recordings can be downloaded onto a computer and then run against sound analysis software. The team came to grips with this technique in a workshop run by Dr Danielle Linton (Wiltshire Wildlife Trust), where she showed how to distinguish echo-location calls, feeding calls, the buzz of a successful catch, and territory calls. This was followed by a bat walk in the Hurst where she identified four species by ear: common pipistrelle, soprano pipistrelle, Daubenton's bat, and noctule.



Bats are protected by law. We may not look in roosts or handle bats unless with a licensed handler. So the team joined Dani Linton and Dr Tom August on a daytime survey in Wytham Woods, where bats were taken from their roosts and handled (everyone handling a bat had to have an obligatory rabies injection). Details of the bats were recorded in nearly 100 bat boxes: their species, sex, age, whether or not lactating, and weight. One box held more than 30 bats, all clustered together in a tight ball. Note: the handlers are very gentle and all the bats were returned to their bat boxes unharmed.

The future

The reason why we study bats is that they are an important indicator of the health of a river. This work is a pilot project centred on the meadows of the Hurst Water Meadow Trust. We hope that, with more volunteers, we can assess the status of the local bat population and thus the health of the River Thames for a significant proportion of its length. If you are interested in becoming involved in the ongoing bat project please contact: hurstwatermt@gmail.com