

BLOG: NightWatcher

Gaby looks out for her local bats

It can feel daunting to raise our voice for bats if we've not done it before. One NightWatcher, **Gaby Law**, took the plunge and raised her concerns about a planned development's potential to impact bats last year. Read her account of why she was concerned, and what she did about it, below.



New developments are popping up all over the country, in the city and the country alike. These days, if you live near grazing land or farmland the chances are there will be a planning application submitted. Grazing land near us was removed from Green Belt and became an 'opportunity site'. Shortly after this a neighbouring development caused outrage amongst residents. The loss of green space, the probable effect on waterfowl at the lake, and the loss of a nesting area resulted in hundreds of locals signing a petition. Very little was said about the bats, both in the surveys or by residents, though one local did take a video of a bat flying over the area. Planning was granted, the green space built on and much of the vegetation, nesting areas and mature trees were lost.

Concerned about the impact of such works on my local area, I joined the Phase 2 Developer Lead Forum, which was a real eye opener. I asked if the others had seen the barn owl I see regularly flying in the area to be met with surprised looks from many: 'there's a barn owl? Really?'. Yes! There are bats too. That caused a mixed reaction. Some were surprised, some shocked or scared, only one or two said they had seen the bats and that they roost nearby.



With busy lives (and unless you are an insomniac or after work dog walker like us!) you might only see daytime wildlife and miss the night-time wildlife. I understand why someone might be 'scared' at the thought of bats flying above them. The first time I saw a bat clearly, its face lit by a streetlight, my reaction began with shock! Beady eyes... were those fangs? ... I thought they were scary. Then, the longer I watched, total fascination and admiration for this little thing came over me, as it made its way between telegraph pole cables.

The more the forum talked about landscaping, the more the landscapers got involved. What could have been bland space became a plan for a meadow, and wildflower mazes. Bat boxes went into the plans. One person wasn't keen on too many flowers, saying they attract bees which sting. This was an opportunity to explain why bats are so important... a bit like bees, but they don't sting or get in your hair, they do it all while we are asleep. Interest was growing! Talking with locals showed me that more needs to be done to bring about awareness and understanding of bats' place in the ecosystem, so we can move away from the constant Halloween association. If conversation among community takes place, changes can be made.



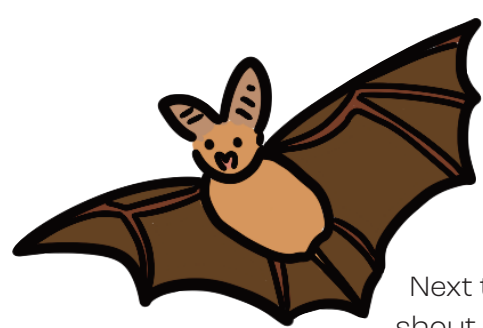
Seeing how things went with that development, I realised we needed to start collecting information on the 'Opportunity site'. We had some images of bats from the site. We think bat numbers are declining, probably due to the lake development, and the landowners had started work to the opportunity site before any surveys were done. I was eager to find out what species of bats were in the photos, but aware that fuzzy white CCTV images would not be enough. We needed to know what they are so I started looking for a local group that would do a survey. That's when NightWatch popped up. Perfect! This survey was exactly what I needed, and it turned out to be very timely!

Shortly after sending back the AudioMoth to BCT, the developer sent letters announcing their plans. I attended the meeting where a retired London Wildlife Trust (LWT) representative asked if bats had been found on the site – he is a friend and aware that I had collected CCTV photos. The developer said no, there was nothing in the ecology report. Surprised by the reply we said nothing, although rather knowing looks passed between us! We felt it best to wait for NightWatch results.

The developer's planning application contained a Baseline Biodiversity Net Gain Assessment concluding that: **"Vegetation structure is varied, providing opportunities for insects, birds and bats to live and breed? – NO."**

The Ecology Impact Assessment stated: **"Very low levels of bat activity by a small number of common and widespread species recorded during the surveys completed to date."**





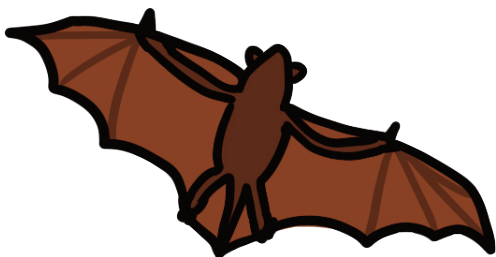
The local resident group called a meeting, inviting the developer and local Councillors. It was very well attended and of course we showed the photos of bats on the site and barn owls.

Next the NightWatch results arrived (thank you Hannah!). Now we could shout about the Noctule, Common Pipistrelle and Soprano Pipistrelle that had been detected nearby! According to Essex Bat Group's website, Common and Soprano Pipistrelle are widespread and occasionally common in Essex, while Noctule are widespread but relatively scarce. We immediately spread this information as far as we could so that others were aware of the wildlife nearby. We used Facebook, Twitter, Resident Group websites, London Wildlife Trust and the Local Records Centre (GIGL). Reference to bats have since been included in comments on the Planning Application. The latest updated ecology report now includes the fact that **'at least 7 species of bat activity were found on the site': Common Pipistrelle, Soprano Pipistrelle, Nathusius Pipistrelle, Noctule, Nyctalus (which can be Noctules or Leisler's bats), Serotine, brown long eared and Myotis'**. Seven out of a possible 18 species is 40%, I was delighted! Sadly, despite the records, the report concludes the opportunity site has a **'high proportion of common and widespread bat species with generally low levels of activity recorded'** and as such, they consider it of **'negligible importance'**.

They also list trees that couldn't properly be checked for roosts so assumed not to be there. This has led me to feeling that 'opportunity site' is a confusing term. It should mean a chance to improve and create something of the site that is a benefit to all. To me, that means respecting the nature and wildlife we have, it should be a win-win, but in reality, the 'opportunity' is very one sided unless nature and locals are properly considered.

Unless you can provide evidence about what nature is using a space, and not be afraid to shout about it, considering wildlife can be easily overlooked by developers. So far, we have had the benefit of photos, the knowledge and experience of an LWT representative who has surveyed the area many times over the years, and invaluable data provided by NightWatch. Only time will tell if it makes a difference, and we will keep doing our best to speak up for bats! I will be signing up for NightWatch 2023 to compare results!

Thank you, Gaby!



This blog was produced for Project NightWatch as part of our guide to taking action for night-time wildlife. You can find the rest our guide at www.bats.org.uk/resources/nightwatch and more detailed guidance on considering bats as part of local developments on the Bat Conservation Trust website: www.bats.org.uk/advice