

Bats and Boats

Bedfordshire Bat Group

Bats and Boats is designed as a different way of engaging the public in the environment. It is seen to have a greater sense of adventure than a normal bat walk and the added danger of being out on the river at night.

Because of this the event tends to reach a different group of people, who would probably not join in a standard bat walk.

It all started in 2009 with a chance coming together Janet Annetts (centre manager for Kempston Outdoor Centre) and Danny Fellman (Park Ranger & Beds Bat Group member) .



The idea of looking for bats in canoes was too interesting to pass by, but a lot of questions remained unanswered. We decided the only way to find out was to give it a go, so we did.



The first Bats and Boats ran in July 2009, we heard very few bats and saw even less, but we did answer a lot of the technical questions about how to run the event and what we may be able to detect or see. Despite the lack of bats everyone enjoyed the experience, so we knew the event had a future. Another session was run in 2009 and a further three following year .

In 2010 funding became an issue for the event, but we were given a grant from the Harpur Trust in Bedford to allow our pilot scheme to continue. This meant that the event would be FREE of charge and the all three sessions were booked within two days.

As we progressed Viking Kayak club became involved with the event and in 2011 they took over the organisation and running of the canoe side of things. This partnership between Viking Kayak

and the Bedfordshire Bat Group has allowed the event to be free of charge for the foreseeable future.

The actual paddle is performed safely by making sure the right people are involved. The element of danger is more in peoples mind than reality.

The paddlers raft together two canoes to make a stable platform for the public and bat group members, everyone wears a properly fitting buoyancy aid and paddling instructions are given before we get onto the water.



A quick safety talk and an introduction to the bat group members (one per rafted pair of boats). One of the bat group gives a quick talk on what we may see and hear and a quick demonstration of a bat detector. Then it's all aboard, usually quite carefully, and once everyone is settled we make sure every raft has a bat detector so everyone can hear what bats are about.

With a batty guide in each boat and experienced paddlers keeping an eye on the safety we can just enjoy the experience of paddling on the water at night and listening out for bats.

We generally hear Pipistrelles and see them silhouetted against the sky and the ghostly fluttering by of the Daubenton's bats. At least one bat guide has a torch to try and pick out the Daubenton's bats in the dark, but this is not always easy for everyone to see as generally the boats are not right next to each other.

We have had some really close encounters with the Daubenton's bats, which is what we really hoped for by being out on the water.



We have run the event on several stretches of the River Great Ouse around Bedford, which allows the bat group to add to its record of what bats are about. There is always the possibility of picking up something unexpected.

On one outing run from Priory Country Park we picked up a Nathusius' Pipistrelle, Later confirmed from a sonogram recording at the time.

The other side of Bats and Boats is the weather. Bats and Boats has had more than its fair share of rain, however this doesn't appear to matter, where people would be running for



cover on a bat walk they seem happy to go out on the water. We have never cancelled a session due to rain, but have given people the choice. Even with it raining for most of the session people have really enjoyed the experience.

The event seems to appeal to family groups and having a mixture of adults and children is what we normally end up with. This appears to work really well and the families tend to want to stay together where possible, there is a maximum of five members of the public per raft, and also means that there is a parent available to keep an eye on their children.

So if you are looking to do something a bit different with your batty evening why not try Bats and Boats or find a canoeing club and set up your version of it.

Others have and there are a variety of river based bat evenings happening now in various ways.



Words & Photos by Daniel Fellman.