

Bat watching for the lazy

In the last issue I started describing the holiday Bob and I had with Wildlife Holidays in Summer 2009. I warned you then that there would be more to come.

So here is another episode.
Jude Hirstwood

Mist netting for the lazy

By the end of the second day, we had had a real feast of experiences - roosts, fantastic wood pasture and a Neolithic cave housing horseshoe bats. We devoured our evening meal with equal enthusiasm. Then we were off into the night. We drove to Felsőtárkány. We parked in a pub car park and wandered into a mundane looking local park - just like any one of a thousand English nondescript municipal parks. As night fell, courting couples strolled in the park; cyclists headed home, a group of young lads hung about practising looking menacing. Another group sat on the opposite side of the lake playing pop music and lighting a fire. Strung along some trees at the side of the lake where a couple of tatty looking mist nets. On a retaining wall sat an Avisoft computer set up. We spent a lot of time looking at it and wondering if could sneak it into one of our bags. "Is this a good site" we asked politely, unconvinced that this was a likely hot spot. Yes, we were told, 24 of the 26 species recorded in Hungary are found here. Well, that put us in our place. Right on cue the bats began to get caught, so well regimented that there was a steady stream of bats, giving us plenty of time to get a close up of the bat in hand before the next one plopped into the net. Each new finding brought joy - whiskered bats, Daubenton's, Bechstein's, greater mouse eared, Leisler's, common pipistrelle and Alcahõe's bat. Each bat was swiftly untangled without us having to raise a gloved finger. All *Greater Mouse Eared and Common pip*. Photo Bob Cornes

this and a steady stream of coffee. Ambassador, you are spoiling us. There was a distinct smell of musk and the rustling of the leaves in the woods behind us - though we were not able to identify who was wearing this pungent perfume, but we think it was probably a beech marten.

Alcahõe's (right) was a bat neither Bob nor I had even heard of. It is a recently recognised species which is similar to the whiskered bat.



The Greater Mouse-Eared was just that. It was ginormous - as you can see from the photo above where we



*Alcahõe's
Bat Photo by
Henry
Stanier*

juxtaposed it with a common pip. (Interestingly the common pip was far from common on the trip and after a while we found ourselves groaning - "no not another Leisler's", longing to see a common pip).

Interestingly Peter Estók reckoned it as easy to distinguish a whiskered from a Brandt's. It all came down to a ridge on the skull - sadly we did not get a chance to try this for ourselves.

When I think of all those nights in the UK I have spent sat by a mist net waiting for the non arrival of bats, the sheer rate of capture was ridiculous and was a trend we were

to see repeated time and again. Sándor explained this was because Hungary is a relatively dry country and the bats are forced to come down to drink at water bodies, so they are easier to catch. With this many bats in such a short time, it was frankly a miracle there were not tears before bedtime.

Roost visiting for the indolent

You never know when you are going to find a bat or a bat roost. The bus pulled into a side street in Eger and we all piled out to head for a large flyover running over a roundabout. The traffic rushed past us and drivers almost crashed at the sight of mad tourists peering up into the underside of the flyover.

You couldn't see the bats snuggled deep in the cavities between bridge sections – but we sure could hear them. For in this unlikely spot were several hundred male Noctules. It was their unceasing chattering which attracted guide Peter Estók as he drove past. Interestingly all the bats here are male. It is thought that the females live in a nearby tower block. This was a fairly jerry-built block with many nooks and crannies just crying out for colonisation.

A gentle perambulation to the Bat Cave

Now this was more arduous. We had to walk a good twenty yards from the bus to an old copper mine. As night fell we were impressed by the blueness of the nearby lake which owed its colour to copper salts. The cave itself was too dangerous to enter as carbon dioxide levels were high, but the more intrepid (i.e. everyone apart from the anaemic wimp that was Jude) scrambled up the slope to watch for bat emergence

Soon we heard the Clanger swanny whistle of horseshoe bats that swept out of the cave in numbers. Why do horseshoes sound so exultant? They make your heart sing. More so when we realised there were two species



Photo Sándor Boldogh swooped past me as they headed off

present - Mediterranean and Greater Horseshoe Bats.

So, was I jealous not to get a ringside view of the emergence? NO, because they .

into the night. I didn't mind when I picked up a strange sound on the detector. It sounded for all the world like a pip on speed. (an inter pulse interval of 85.5 ± 26.2 compared to 102.5 ± 33 for a soprano pip for the technically minded). The calls were ridiculously fast and when I caught sight of the bat that was emitting the

sound the same was true of its flight. Whoosh and you'd missed it. It was so fast you could pick up the Doppler effect as it whizzed past at the sort of speed you see in cartoons. Was this the bat for whom the phrase "Bat out of hell" was coined? What an earth was it? ¹

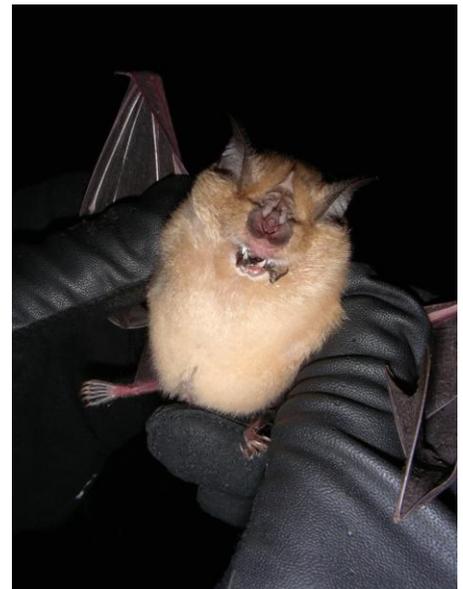


Sitting Pretty

The pictures to the right are Henry Stanier's and document a quite remarkable moment. A couple of days later we were mist netting across another river. Bob, Sándor and Henry waded into the water to liberate the bats which flew into it, while I sat in a comfy chair. What interested Sándor was that almost every bat we caught was a Greater Horseshoe.

There must have been a roost nearby and Sándor had been unaware of its location. So we had actually had a useful role to play in bat conservation.

We soon fell into the routine of catch, untangle, photograph, release, catch, untangle,



photograph and release when Henry noticed that the bat in this photo had something in her mouth – and next to her in the net was a hawk moth with a large bat mouth shaped chunk out of its wing. When we looked at the bat again there she was with her snack in her mouth and, I swear an indignant look in her eye. We released her as quickly as possible as she was lactating, but it was only as she flew off that we realised we still had her supper.



I've put several photos from this trip on the website – have a look at recent pictures.

¹ *It was a Schreiber's – more of which next time*