

The Slip End Noctule Comes of Age

The story so far.

A Noctule was found grounded at Slip End and taken into care. She then gave birth in captivity. Mum and baby were doing well, but could we get the youngster into the wild or was he to be a permanent captive like this mum?

Martin O'Connor tells all



Photo by Chris Lunn

On the June 12th Tanya was exercising both the bats; she was holding the pup up when suddenly he opened his wings and started flapping them. The following day she took the pup into our bedroom, the one room with only a few crevices. She held him up and within a minute or two he took flight. A slow drop to the floor would be a better description, but nevertheless a flight. On the 14th he weighted 20g even though he was starting to use a lot of energy, with flying lessons occurring almost every night. He started to take mealworm innards and as his teeth grew bigger began to bite the skins and eventually took the whole mealworm.

In the meantime, discussions at the Bat Group committee meeting had occurred as to how we were going to release him. The group had previously decided not to build a permanent

flight cage. After several hours of searching for something that would be big enough to fly him in, Tanya came up with either a large Polytunnel

The £550 tunnel was ordered a few days later. It measured 7.2m x 4m x 2m and as it turns out is probably one of the larger flight cages in the country. On Sunday the 27th June five members of the Bat Group erected the tunnel at a secret location in Luton. After a couple of days finishing the inside by laying down white dust sheets (so the bat could be seen after landing), filling up gaps (to stop him inadvertently escaping) and building a door, the tunnel was finished.

Meanwhile the weaning process was continuing, Tanya was increasing the innards intake each day and by 27th June he was able to take complete mealworms. He was still kept with mum; however she was getting more and more disgruntled with him. We started to separate them a day or so later (after I had seen him feeding himself) On 1st July he weighted 28g He was being flown every day and ate mealworms in his box on his return on 12th June he still weighted 28g.

This proved that the weaning had been successful as although he had been flying regularly he was maintaining his weight. The first flight was on the 5th July. By this time he was flying well, turning twice in the tunnel. Initially we flew him every other day and he increased his strength and flight ability each time he was flown. From the 2nd July he was flown every night for a minimum of an hour. Every night he increased the number of laps he could do in the flight cage where he could sustain continuous flight for several minutes.



Photo Viv Heys

On Saturday 17th July we spent a full night in the tunnel with him. A, 400mg Biotrack radiotag was applied between the shoulder blades.

Some interesting observations were made while flying him. Due to enclosed environment, his echolocation calls were at a relatively high frequency, peaking at about 27 kHz. Sonograms revealed strong overlapping echoes from the tunnel walls. Perhaps because of this, the bat seemed to have difficulty in locating the tunnel walls at first, and frequently bumped into them. After several flights he soon learned to avoid them and turned before reaching them. His wing beats were much more rapid than those of a Noctule flying in the open. Possibly the most striking was his ability to take off from the ground with apparent ease, using his wings to push himself up until he had sufficient clearance for shallow wing beats.

A traditional bat box was made and then hung from the back of our house. He was placed in the box, with food and water on the morning of the 18th and a cloth was used to block the entrance hole during the day.



Photo Jude Hirstwood

In the evening we gathered at home for the release. After checking his weight (29g), the tag and his forearm length (49mm), he was put back in the bat box and the towel was removed to unblock the entrance. A couple of hours later nothing other than a little

movement and echolocation could be heard from the box. Then about an hour later (10.55pm) he flew out and strongly flew to the west. We tracked him for about 10 minutes; he was in large circles apparently exploring the surrounding area. After this he flew out of range possibly to the south east

Tanya and I came out and checked every so often and around 1.30am to 2.00am Tanya picked him up again. I came down and he was still nearby. Tanya saw him fly over and I heard him. Tanya stayed up and checked every so often, about 4am he was flying around the garden and struggling to find the entrance of the box. He landed on the garden umbrella, so Tanya picked him up and put him on the entrance of the box. He climbed in and could be heard eating the mealworms left for him.

That morning, having checked he was still in the box, I decided to adapt the box slightly. I shortened the top of the box to raise it higher up the wall, and added a rectangle of carpet to the rear of the box. This increased the surface for him to land on when he returned enabling him to crawl from the carpet to the box.

With the tag still working, the following night we decided to follow his movements, but the weather turned and it started raining just as he was checking out the light levels. As far as we are aware he didn't leave the box. When I checked the box at 4.00am he was still in there. On Tuesday 20th July, Bob, Viv, Angie and I were at Luton Hoo mist netting. After we packed up the mist nets Bob got out the radio tracking equipment and within a second, Bob picked him up.

At first he was flying around the main house. The next contact was when we were crossing the lake, he had moved down to the lake area. When we arrived back at the cars we tried again, he was still around the lake.

On the following morning, as Tanya was leaving for work at 5am, she found a strong signal and when she looked in the box she found he had managed to find and enter the box himself.

From the 21st July he was coming and going as he pleased. Each night he would circle the house a couple of times and then head off towards Luton Hoo.

On Thursday the 22nd July, he left at the normal time, however on the Friday morning he was not in the box. Friday saw group members try and find him via the car tracking system, both in the day and evening, but to no avail, however Saturday the 24th saw him return to the box provided.

That morning I weighed him, he weighed 27grams, which was a loss of 2 grams since his release. This was still a good weight and indicated that he was feeding on his own. On July 25th I checked the weight again and he had lost a further gram, I gave him a few more mealworms just to get his weight back up, but we had been reducing them for a couple of days and it is not that surprising that he had lost a little weight. The idea of reducing the mealworms was to encourage him to feed when out, and although he lost a little weight, he must have been feeding or he would of lost a lot more.

The tag failed on the 27th July .We could still monitor him by checking the box and he continued to come back up until at least the 31st of July (after this Tanya and I went on holiday).

The great news was that I had examined the droppings and found invertebrate wings in them, as mealworms don't have wings this told us that he was feeding himself in the wild and although he came back to the box and we still feed him mealworms, we started to reduce the number.

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Photo Martin O'Connor

He came back to the box up until the 9th August and we have not seen him since. This has been a successful soft release, we have learnt a lot throughout the process, which is very hard work, however very worthwhile. The pup has now moved on from the house; however the box will remain in place for some time, just in case he comes back.

Editor's Note Mum has remained with us as the Bedfordshire Bat Group's Licensed Education Bat and continues to live with Martin and Tanya



Martin and Tanya Photo by Jude Hirstwood

