

Batman comes to Kingston

It was late afternoon on Sunday, 14th July – the day of the Wimbledon men's singles final. The excited capacity crowd, including many children, buzzed in anticipation. However, these people hadn't come to see the tennis but to hear Ryan Greaves speak about the only mammals capable of true flight – bats.

The occasion was the third talk in a series organised by the Kingston Nature Recovery Group's Wildlife Gardening Forum. The venue was the Parish Hall and every seat was taken. There is little that Ryan doesn't know about bats. Formerly employed by the Sussex Wildlife Trust he now works for the West Sussex-based Knepp Estate, famous for its revolutionary re-wilding programme which has inspired dozens of comparable ventures over the last decade or so.

Ryan began by demolishing some of the popular misconceptions about bats. They are not blind and there is little chance of them getting tangled in your hair. They are useful to have around, too, as even the tiny pipistrelles – small enough to fit into a matchbox – can consume as many as 3000 mosquitos in a night's hunting. There are 1400 species in the world (constituting 22% of all mammals) but just 17 resident in the UK, all of which can be found in our county.

Although all the UK species are insectivorous, others have evolved to consume a wide range of other food including fruit, fish, nectar and of course, in the case of the notorious vampires, blood. Insects are not only taken on the wing but sometimes picked off leaves or branches of trees. Bats are long-lived, even the smaller species having a life span of up to 15 years while larger ones sometimes survive more than twice as long as that. They produce just one baby a year, known as a pup. In this country, pups are generally born in July and are on the wing within a few weeks.

Although bats may occasionally be seen hunting during the day, they generally roost at this time, often in old woodpecker holes in trees, in roof spaces, caves and tunnels. As the weather cools, they become less active and eventually hibernate, waking in the spring.

Over millions of years, an extraordinary evolutionary arms race has developed between bats and moths. Bats detect moths by emitting high frequency acoustic signals and interpreting the resulting echoes to work out the precise location of the intended prey. But moths, in turn, have developed scales which muffle the signals received by bats and some have even evolved the ability to produce sounds of their own to confuse their hunters.

Bats have many predators including birds like sparrowhawks, barn owls, some gulls and domestic cats. Ring-necked parakeets, now common in many parts of the country, are a new danger, competing with bats for roosting spaces. Other threats are posed by pesticides, wind turbines, artificial lighting and building work and despite the fact that all British bat species are protected by law and may not be injured, killed or even disturbed without a licence, most are barely holding their own and some species are declining. However, our knowledge of bats is still quite limited and there is much to learn. Those interested in helping bats should join a local group. They can help in practical ways also by planting night-scented flowers attractive to moths (honeysuckle, stock, evening primrose) and by erecting bat boxes high up on the side of houses – taking care not to put them on south-facing walls.

At the end of this hugely appreciated talk, there was an opportunity to see at close hand the live bats that Ryan had brought with him – a chance that not just the younger members of the audience greatly appreciated! (These were animals that had been nursed back to health after injury but which

could not be released back into the wild). A collection raised enough money not just to pay for the hire of the venue but to make a donation of £50 to the Sussex Bat Group.

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