

Bat Box Checks

I have always liked bat box checks as they give the opportunity to see bats close up so I am rather surprised at myself having attended so few this summer (mostly to do with going away at the wrong times). I did however go to a combined bat box/dormouse box check at Netley Woods. At this site checks are done with someone with a licence for bat boxes and someone with a licence for dormouse boxes. Dormouse boxes were put up there after dormice were found nesting in bat boxes. At the check on 14 September no dormice were found in bat boxes but some bats were found in dormouse boxes!

Dormouse boxes have a circular entrance hole like a bird box but they are attached to a tree with the hole facing the trunk, battens above and below the hole holding it slightly away so there is a space to allow entry. Standard procedure for checking these boxes is to block the hole (a yellow duster seems to be universally used) and gradually replace the lid with a piece of clear perspex by sliding them across the top to see whether there is a nest inside. If there is a nest the lid is put back and the whole box put into a large plastic bag before removing the lid to examine the nest thoroughly. The large plastic bag ensures that all dormice found and examined will be returned to the box before it is replaced. After a time to allow the dormice to settle down the duster is quietly removed.



Martyn Cooke



Adult dormouse



*Soprano pipistrelle, snail and duster
Photos, Derek Smith*

Just two boxes held dormice. The first had a mother with young. In the first photo above Martyn is holding young dormice until they can be weighed and returned to the box. The second box had a mother (above, with a missing tail tip) with a litter of newly born, furless babies (“pinkies”) which were not removed from the nest, to which the mother was quickly returned. The third photo above shows the box containing a female soprano pipistrelle, a lovely banded snail and some yellow duster stuffed through the entrance hole.

Martyn Cooke oversees all bat box checks and what follows is compiled from his Facebook posts:

27-Jul Combe Bottom: We found a new species for the site - Natterer’s bat. Not just one but 46 in 3 separate 2FN boxes. As it’s very difficult to count clusters there could well have been a few more. We had two groups of 14 and a group of 18. They had obviously been moving around as all but 5 of the 27 boxes had deep piles of droppings.

30-Jul Horleyland Wood, Gatwick: Long day at Gatwick, as we also checked all the dormouse boxes. Alas no dormice, but a few nests and only one brown long-eared bat. We also found a yellow-necked mouse and lots of spiders!

07-Aug Thundry Meadows: 15 Natterers today, back to normal after last year’s amazing 137! The 1FW box which held 91 last year was empty, apart from 6 inches of droppings. A few soprano pipistrelles were also found.

13-Aug Ockham Common: Small site for us with just 20 boxes. Biggest mating group found this year so far with a male and 8 female soprano pipistrelles.

21-Aug Fir Tree Copse: 26 bats found including a group of 20 Natterer's bats in a 2F box.

11-Sep Wallis Wood: After a weekend off for the bat conference, it was back to checking boxes today. Really nice woodland but only 2 bats found, a male Natterer's bat and a female soprano pipistrelle. The highlight today, however, was not a bat but a bird, my first ever Surrey raven. Magnificent! Lot of buzzard and marsh tit activity too.



Soprano pipistrelles in dormouse box, Derek Smith



Natterer's bat, Martyn Cooke

14-Sep Netley: More boxes today, a combination of bat boxes and dormouse boxes in a beech woodland on the North Downs. Have to admit we were trounced today by the Dormouse Group, with no bats at all in our boxes. This was the first time since we began checking back in 2002 that no brown long-eared bats were home. To make matters worse we did find 5 soprano pipistrelles snuggled up in 3 of the dormouse boxes much to the amusement of the SDG members.

17-Sep Frensham Little Pond: Heathland site with large stands of pine surrounding a large lake, one of my favourite locations not least because it has a cafe! First box contained a group of 3 soprano pipistrelles, a good omen. By the end we had found 19 in 8 different boxes. Also today plenty of tree bumblebees (*Bombus hypnorum*) which we found in 3 boxes. This was the first site in the county where we encountered these small bees which have spread throughout the country. As usual all the bee nests were buried in old bird nests.

2016 Running Totals (to 17 September):

Sites: 11, Boxes Checked: 315, Evidence of Use: 135 (43%), Bats Found: 145, Species: 3.

Looking at Martyn's running total I was rather surprised that the number of species found in boxes this year was only 3 (soprano pipistrelle, Natterer's bat and brown long eared bat in case you weren't concentrating). One of the few sites still to be checked is Thursley Common where we can expect noctules to be found.

Derek Smith