

The night shift at Wimbledon Park

DAVE DAWSON reports that the heritage site supports many bats.

AT SUNSET IN THE SUMMER Swifts can be seen hawking insects over Wimbledon Park Lake. These birds travel long distances across London from their nest sites to feed on the aquatic insects emerging from the water. In spring and autumn, Swifts are joined by House Martins and Sand Martins stopping off to refuel their reserves for migration. After sunset, as the sky darkens, the birds depart and all goes quiet... or does it?

Last summer a band of volunteers, led by Alison Fure of the London Bat Group, arrived at sunset, equipped with ultrasonic detecting equipment and specially designed Harp traps to allow safe inspection of captured bats. They found at least seven species, in numbers vastly outnumbering the birds. The lake and its surrounds are among the best sites for foraging bats in south London.

Shortly after sunset, the first bats came from roosts in trees on the golf course and the island in the lake. The most abundant species, the tiny Soprano pipistrelle, was the first, followed swiftly by the equally small Common pipistrelle. These two weigh just 6 grams, the weight of a 10p coin and, when furled, one fits comfortably inside a match box. It was exciting to stand on the lakeside near Ashen Grove Wood with myriads of these tiny bats flitting past, outlined against the darkening sky. Without the bat detectors all would be quiet, but the equipment made their ultrasonic calls audible.

The larger species emerged later, with both the high-flying Noctule and Daubenton's bat coming from nearby trees. Being very sensitive



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A Daubenton Bat feeding in flight (above, photo courtesy Paul van Hoof Natuurfotografie); the woodland clearance of Owl Copse (below) could mean the loss of roosts suitable for bats

to light, Daubenton's arrived after dusk, but could just be seen, skimming low over the water to pick insects from the surface. Twenty years ago, Daubenton's bat was common near the water sports centre. Now, the lake is illuminated by street lamps and Daubenton's are seen only where trees shield the lake – beside Ashen Grove Wood in the east and Owl Copse in the west.

Daubenton's is not much larger than pipistrelles, but the Noctule bat is the weight of a House Sparrow and is the largest species at the lake, although it, too, is much less common than 30 years ago. A few individuals of another large, high-flying bat, Leisler's, were detected, plus the equally

uncommon Serotine bat, but the greatest excitement was finding good numbers of Nathusius's pipistrelle, a migrant from the continent, sometimes from as far away as Latvia. It, too, preferred the shaded, dark corners of the lake. Sadly, the survey didn't find the Brown long-eared Bat, last heard locally 10 years ago.

Unfortunately, last December, Owl Copse was badly affected by woodland clearance. Many trees suitable for bat roosting were felled. All the lakeside trees, the young trees and the shrub understorey are gone. This small woodland no longer shields the lake from light pollution and it will be many years before it does so again.