COWES BAT SURVEY, 1986 – 87

M. J. Parker

Before 1985 very little information was known about the distribution of bats in the Cowes region of the Isle of Wight. At this time only two roosting sites had been located and there were only a handful of other recent records – although ironically these included a record of the very rare Bechsteins Bat in 1981. In 1986, in an attempt to find out a great deal more about bat distribution in the Cowes area, it was decided to carry out a comprehensive bat survey, which continued through 1986 and 1987. This survey resulted in eleven new roost sites being located and also in the location of major feeding areas where the bats were identified with the aid of bat detectors. Public relations were not neglected and posters and displays about bats were put up in schools and in the local library. A total of nearly ten people took part in the survey, a high proportion of them sixth formers from Cowes High School.

The attempts to locate roost sites included searches made of potentially productive buildings, such as churches and farm buildings. This resulted in several new colonies and a variety of different species being found, including Serotine, Whiskered and Natterer's Bats. Door to door enquiries were also made asking people if they knew of any bat colonies, although these proved to be futile and no positive information regarding the location of colony roost sites was gained from them. Encouragingly though, quite a large number of people volunteered information about bats after seeing the 'Help Save Bats' posters and a total of over twenty enquiries were received in the course of 1986 and 1987, several of which resulted in new colonies being located.

Bat detector records were also collated, most of which were predictably Pipistrelles, although there were several records made of Noctules, a species thought to be fairly rare on the Island. Several other species were also recorded.

One of the most exciting aspects of the survey was the formation of a 'bat hospital' at the home of a Cowes bat group member, Mrs. Sheila Cooper. The 'hospital' dealt with an increasing number of patients and encouragingly had quite a high success rate with many injured bats later being re-released where they were found. One female Pipistrelle gave birth at the hospital and, to the delight of bat group members, both mother and baby were later successfully released back into their colony.

A number of bat problems and enquiries were dealt with, which included the demanded immediate expulsion of a large colony of Pipistrelles from one house, and the proposed selling and renovation of another house thought to house a bat colony. In another incident one lady had rather a shock when she came down to breakfast one morning to find a live Whiskered Bat in her kitchen sink! Although very wet, the bat was later released successfully.

The response of members of the public to the survey varied in degrees from considerable interest to complete disgust. Those who were disgusted included one woman who, when we were making door to door enquiries, slammed the door in our faces with the words 'Of course we haven't got bats in our roof – it's private property!' At another house the householder was terrified of the bats in her roof and, on my calling to

her from the loft that there were bats present, she decided that the only escape route was to run outside into the garden. Unfortunately the bats, annoyed by the disturbance that they had suffered from me, had the same idea of escape and soon the lady was running even faster back to the house with dozens of Pipistrelles swooping around her. Such incidents may be amusing, but are also serious, as they underline the fear that some people still have of bats. However, on the other hand, many householders were not at all disconcerted at the sight of six bat group members turning up on a roost visit and in many houses we were supplied with welcome cups of coffee and biscuits! We also encountered a lot of light-hearted leg-pulling from people, including the inevitable jibe of 'batman'!

On a number of occasions talks about bats were given to children, including a visit to a primary school, an organised count of bats emerging from a roost at a 'Wildlife Workshop' for under-privileged children and visits to two Island libraries where we had the task of supervising more than forty high-spirited youngsters between the ages of five and nine years in making bat mobiles! The public relations campaign was completed with coverage in local newspapers and on local radio.

Overall the survey was a success and is a foundation for further study in the area. Evening bat surveys in the centre of Cowes were very enjoyable as there proved to be high numbers of both bats and pubs! Many interesting people as well as interesting bats were encountered and we hope that many of these people are now sympathetic to the cause of bat conservation.

The main participants in the survey were: Matthew Parker, Matthew Arnell, Colin Newbold, Vicky Biggs, Helen Brown and Sheila and Clive Cooper.