



New Forest Batbox Project Hampshire Bat Group

Background

Hampshire Bat Group (HBG) embarked on a survey of the bats in the New Forest in 2006. A particular focus for the project was to establish the distribution of two rare species Bechstein's bat *Myotis bechsteinii* and barbastelle bat *Barbastella barbastellus*; about which very little was known at the time.

Both species are normally found roosting in trees although there are a few records of buildings being used, particularly old timber framed barns which are attractive to barbastelle bats. In winter underground sites may also be used. In the New Forest Bechstein's bat appears to favour oak *Quercus sp.* or beech *Fagus sylvatica* tree roost sites, typically using holes excavated by woodpeckers in dense woodland with a good under storey layer. Barbastelles again favour oak and beech trees but are more commonly found roosting behind flaking bark and in splits, tears and calloused wounds of damaged trunks and branches.

HBG's survey methods in the New Forest have included monthly bat detector transects and working under a licence from Natural England to capture bats for identification in the hand. Some of the captured bats have been fitted with radio tags and tracked to find new roost sites and maternity colonies. Small identification rings have been fitted to the forearms of some of the bats to enable the HBG researchers to identify any individuals recaptured in the future. Since the project began seven breeding colonies of Bechstein's and barbastelle bats have been located.

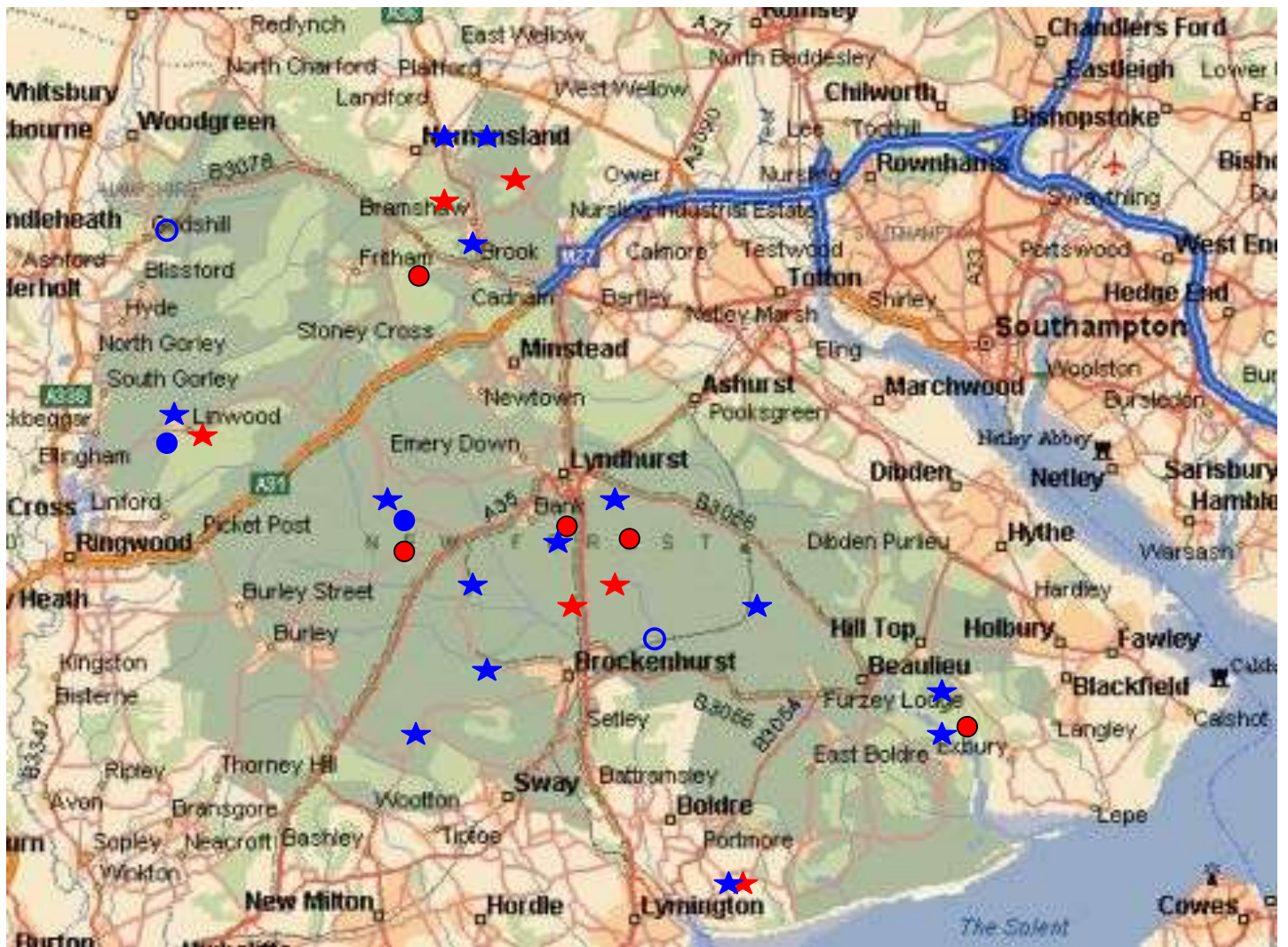


Bechstein's bat caught in mist net



Bechstein's bat fitted with radio transmitter and ring

Figure 1 Records of Bechstein's & Barbastelle Bats 2006-2012



Key

- Bechstein's bat maternity colonies
- Barbastelle bat maternity colonies
- ★ Bechstein's bat – male and non breeding females only captured
- ★ Barbastelle bat – male only captured or bat detector record

The Bat Box Project

The latest phase of the project has involved putting up bat boxes in four areas across the Forest. These areas have been chosen because the local habitat appears suitable and likely to support breeding colonies of Bechstein's and barbastelle bats but where despite past survey efforts breeding females have not yet been captured to confirm this. We are also interested in a third species grey long-eared bat *Plecotus austriacus* another rare bat which is visually similar to the common brown long-eared bat *P. auritus*. Some of the bat boxes have therefore been placed in locations close to where there have been records of this species.

All of the information gathered will help to build a more complete understanding of the range and breeding status of Hampshire's rare bats in the New Forest. In turn this will provide information for land managers to safeguard and where possible improve habitat for the species.

Purpose of this Newsletter

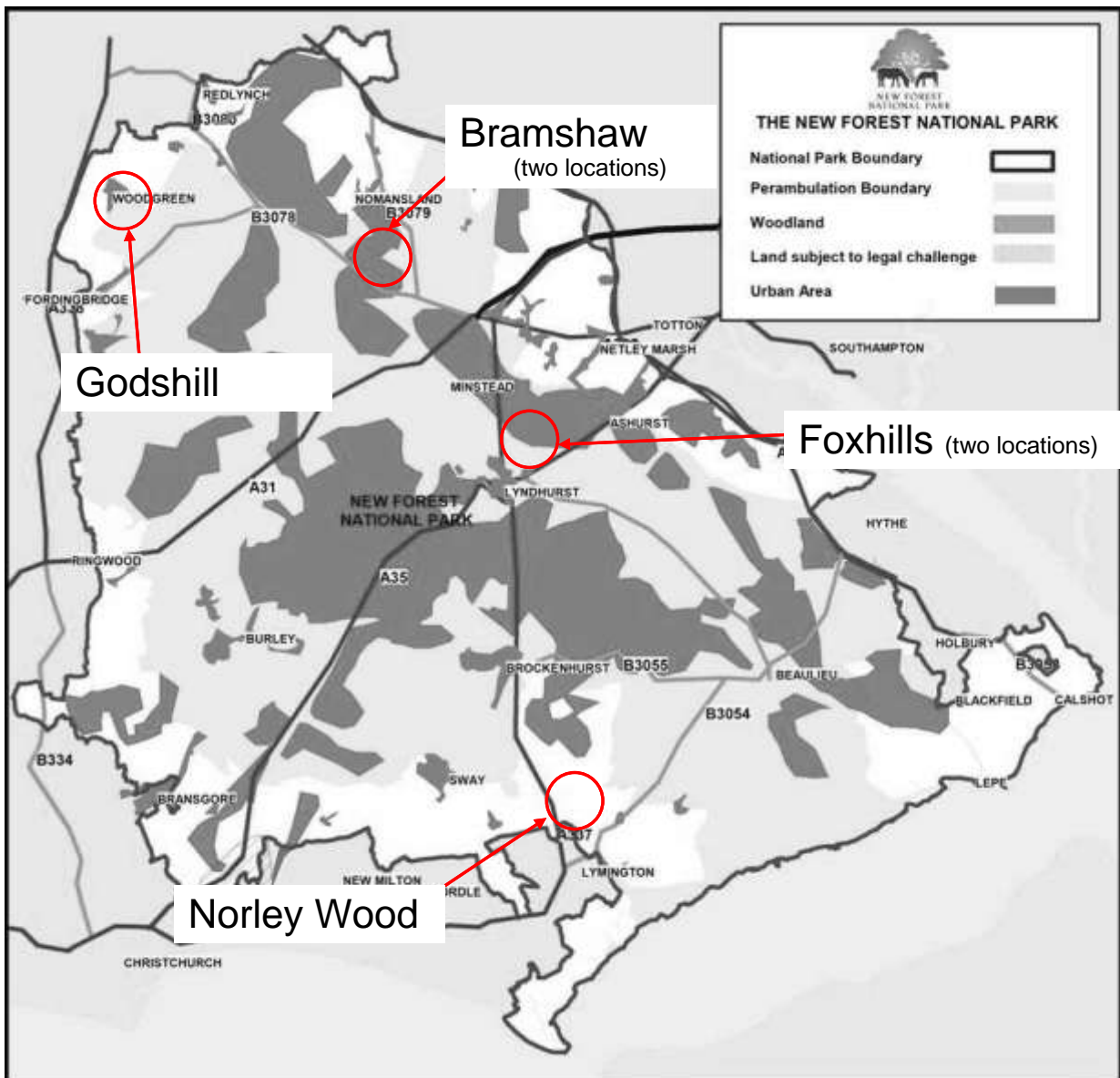
This newsletter provides an update on the projects to date and in particular actions taken under the 'Bat Box' project since February 2012. A similar newsletter will be produced annually to inform on our progress. More details of the two HBG projects (both of which are still on-going) can also be found on the Group's website (see the weblink at the end of this article).

Actions to Date (Feb-Dec 2012)

Site visits were conducted to confirm locations for the bat boxes with the four Forestry Commission keepers in March 2012. Ninety six bat boxes were then erected in four areas of the Forest (see **Figure 2**) over two weekends in April and May. Seven volunteers assisted the project manager along with two of the Forestry Commission staff. The first check was undertaken over two days in September by myself and seven other volunteers. Despite being very early days with only two months for bats to find the boxes signs of occupation were evident in eight boxes as follows:

Site name	Results
Norley Wood	c 12 brown long eared <i>Plecotus auritus</i> bats in one box 3 boxes with small number of bat droppings (pipistrelle-like) 1 x female soprano pipistrelle <i>Pipistrellus pygmaeus</i> bat in box
Bramshaw	1 x male soprano pipistrelle bat in box small number of bat droppings in one box
Godshill	3 x soprano pipistrelle bats (2 x female and 1 x male) in one box
Foxhills	no signs of occupation

Figure 2 Bat Box Locations





Volunteers numbering and erecting bat boxes in April



Although it is early days we have been really pleased with the results. Over time we hope to build a database of records and by ringing individuals hope to record movements and roosting patterns of individuals over time. Some bat species have been recorded living in excess of 40 years and some need more interested volunteers who can give a long-term commitment to the project!

Records

All of the records obtained through the project are mapped and sent via the Hampshire Bat Group recorder to Hampshire Biological Information Centre Hbic. Individual landowners are provided with a short report of the bats found on their land.



Barbastelle (left) and Bechstein's bat (right). The main aim of the project is to develop distribution maps of these two rare species across the Forest.

Future Actions

At least two surveys will be undertaken to check the bat boxes in spring and autumn each year for an indefinite period. Any new records will continue to be sent to Hbic, Forestry Commission keepers and any other landowners.

Additional funding has been received from the National Park Authority to send some bat droppings for DNA analysis. This enables us to identify the species even if the bat is not present in a box when it is surveyed. This method successfully identified bat species roosting in a number of buildings in 2012 including a very rare record of Bechstein's bat roosting in a house loft.

The very important detector and capture surveys will continue with a small number of individual females being radio tracked each year if we believe this will lead us to maternity roost sites for new colonies.

Funding

The HBG Bat Box Project is a partnership between Hampshire Bat Group and the New Forest National Park Authority. The project has been funded by the National Park's Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) and the Hampshire & Isle of Wight Community Foundation (HIWCF) via the New Forest Trust who have collected money from the Visitor Gift Scheme. The Bat Group also has the support of the Forestry Commission (FC) and relevant consents and licences from Natural England.

How can you help?

We are particularly keen to look for signs of some of these rare species in old timber framed barns and private woodlands which are not pony grazed. If you think you have bats roosting in your loft we would also like to hear from you.



Project Manager (and licence holder)

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Find out more about this project at the Hampshire Bat Group's website www.hampshirebatgroup.org.uk . Find out more about the National Park's conservation activities and SDF funding at www.newforestnpa.gov.uk. Find out more about the HIOWCF www.hantscf.org.uk & New Forest Trust at www.newforesttrust.org.uk