

First European Bat Night in Cyprus

All over Europe, European Bat Night takes place, usually at the end of August. Typically, presentations are given and the public has the opportunity to go on a bat walk. On Sunday September 9th, the first ever Bat Night took place in Cyprus, co-organised by the Forestry Department and NGO Animal Responsibility Cyprus ARC/Kivotos. The event was held at the Nicosia Environmental Centre in Athalassa.

One could be excused for thinking that only a few people would turn up. However, we arrived to a full car park and, amazingly, the Environmental Centre itself was full to overflowing with members of the Cypriot public who were interested enough to come and find out about our bats.

Perhaps, with the warm climate of Cyprus making it possible to spend evenings sitting in their gardens, people have over the years been used to seeing the bats but have never known anything about these mysterious creatures (apart from nonsensical beliefs that they harm people or fly into their hair).

Participants learned a lot from a Power Point presentation given by Haris Nicolaou of the Forestry department. Haris is the person responsible for finding, identifying and keeping records of the island's bats. The presentation was followed by a walk through Alassa Park. ARC supplied bat detectors. Unfortunately, extremely high and gusting winds had prevailed over the weekend – not the optimum flying conditions for bats.

What is gratifying has been the public's response. Particularly welcomed was the news that one tiny pipistrelle can eat two to three thousand mosquitos and other insects per night. "Now that I know they eat so many insects, I'm happy to have them in my garden when they come to the swimming pool to drink," said one woman.

"We're no longer worried," said another man, who had contacted ARC because his wife was concerned about having bats in the roof of their home. When it was explained that this was a maternity roost used by females who would only stay while they raised their young, after which they would leave, the couple's attitude changed. Also good for householders to know is that bats are mammals and, as such, in one year a female can only produce one baby bat. Moreover, many of the young bats will not survive to adulthood, and the mortality rate of the adults should also be considered. People tend to think that bats will multiply like mice, but in fact just the opposite is true.

The animals have difficulty in surviving, given the loss of their habitat. Imagine the bat habitat lost in forest fires or think of the large areas of land in the Paphos district, for example, built on by developers. Add to that birds who hunt bats and those who enjoy illegally shooting the harmless fruitbats and it becomes clear that the sensible thing to do is to put up a couple of bat boxes on one's property. We have, in fact been approached by several people who are interested in putting up bat boxes in order to help out these harmless and helpful little creatures in their struggle for survival.

After the bats emerge in the evening, they will eventually fly off to their feeding grounds. (The fruitbats may fly distances of 20 to 30 kilometres.) The tiny pipistrelles and other insectivorous bats cannot simply fly out in the open. (Last year from my office window, I saw a crow swoop down, catch a little Kuhl's pipistrelle and fly off with it to a nearby roof where the unfortunate little creature was devoured.) For reasons of safety, bats will fly along a linear feature such as a line of trees. Thus, even removing treelines will leave the creatures exposed to predators and unable to travel to their feeding grounds.

Bats need all the help they can get. We are encouraged by the interest shown by the public. In many countries, regular bat walks are held, giving people the opportunity to listen to the bats as they echolocate. Children in particular, find this quite exciting. ARC is happy to come with bat detectors, should any readers know of bat colonies and be interested to find out what species they are. A detector will identify the frequency at which the bats are echolocating. In most cases this tells us which species they belong to. Interested members of the public or teachers are welcome to contact ARC (colourful posters and leaflets are available in Greek and English. Posters are also available in Turkish). www.animalscyprus.org