

Embargoed until 3rd September 2021

Rare bats settle 100km east, attracted by fine food and a property with potential

An urgent appeal has been launched to help save the home of a pioneering breeding colony of greater horseshoe bats recently discovered in West Sussex. The site, currently up for sale, is some 100km east of the bats' current stronghold in Devon and Dorset – an enormously encouraging sign for a bat that suffered an estimated 90% decline in Britain in the 20th century.

“With help, this small but hugely significant colony of greater horseshoe bats could become a real biodiversity success story – a species on the road to recovery and now returning to one of its former haunts after an absence of more than a century,” said Dr Lucy Rogers, CEO with wildlife charity Vincent Wildlife Trust.

The Sussex Bat Appeal has been launched by Vincent Wildlife Trust and Sussex Bat Group to buy the derelict stableblock being used by the bats before it is placed on the open market. The two organisations have been given nine months by the owners to raise the purchase price. £200,000 will secure ownership of the stable block and a further £150,000 will fund the renovation work and the building enhancements needed to allow the bat colony to expand.

“Once the site is enhanced for the bats, we would expect over time to see good levels of survival and reproductive success, resulting in a growing, thriving maternity colony. It is also hoped that this site will act as a honeypot, attracting further pioneers to this area,” said Dr Henry Schofield, Head of Conservation for the Trust.

Vincent Wildlife Trust currently looks after the roost sites of some 50% of Britain's greater horseshoe bat population and has been instrumental in driving the recovery of this bat species, helped too by legal protection given to all bat species in 1981.

Trustees/Directors: Dr David Bullock (Chair), Dr Liam Lysaght, Professor Robbie McDonald, Clementine Dymond, Georgie Holmes-Skelton, Sarah Binstead, Shelly Moledina.

Chief Executive: Dr Lucy Rogers. **Company Secretary:** Tim Bennett

The greater horseshoe bat is one of the largest bats found in Britain and one of the easier bats to identify, with its horseshoe-shaped ‘nose’ and a preference to dangle upside down from a beam or ceiling, held on by its spindly legs and cloaked with its wings when asleep. Other than its tiny cousin, the lesser horseshoe bat, no other British bat hangs in this way. By the latter half of the 20th century, the species was heading for possible extinction, following a loss of insect-rich pasture and semi-natural woodlands over which to feed, a lack of suitable, undisturbed sites for breeding and hibernation, and the use of now-banned timber treatment chemicals.

Until now, the greater horseshoe bat has been largely confined to south-west England and parts of Wales. From a 20th century low of some 4,000, the current estimated population is around 13,000 (to put this in context, there is an estimated three million pipistrelles – our most common bat). This rise in its population may have helped fuel this eastward quest to plant new roots in an old home.

The West Sussex site will be owned by Vincent Wildlife Trust as a bat roost in perpetuity. It will be managed by the Trust in conjunction with the Sussex Bat Group.

“Right now, this is probably the most important greater horseshoe bat roost site in Britain and the most significant find since the group was formed in 1984. It was discovered by a member of Sussex Bat Group in 2019 and we are determined to raise the funds needed to secure the building for this vitally important bat colony. As well as wardening and managing the site, there will also be opportunities for volunteers to help with the monitoring of the bats,” said Sheila Wright, Secretary to the Sussex Bat Group.

More information about greater horseshoe bats, the Sussex Bat Appeal and ways to donate can be found at www.vwt.org.uk/sussex-bat-appeal/

Ends

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Editors' Notes

Photos are attached with this news release and are free to use with this story, if credited. For further information about the Sussex bat colony and the Sussex Bat Appeal, please contact:

At Vincent Wildlife Trust:

Hilary Macmillan, VWT's Head of Communications at hilarymacmillan@vwt.org.uk / 07779 472320 or Dr Lucy Rogers, VWT's CEO at lucyrogers@vwt.org.uk / 01531 636441.

At Sussex Bat Group

Tony Hutson at Hutson.t@btinternet.com / 01273 890341 or Sheila Wright at sheila@batscan.org / 01903 810119

The Sussex Appeal video is introduced by naturalist and author Stephen Moss and can be viewed here: <https://vimeo.com/592344150>

Background Information

Vincent Wildlife Trust

Established in 1975, Vincent Wildlife Trust (VWT) is an independent charity and a leading mammal conservation organisation with a track record of delivering high quality wildlife interventions, based on scientific evidence. We are respected internationally for our mammal research and our innovative evidence-based ways of halting and reversing declines in mammal populations. We are currently leading the reversal of the pine marten decline in England and Wales.

For more than 30 years, VWT has been a leading force in bat conservation, specialising in the conservation of the two horseshoe bat species found in Britain. VWT manages nearly 40 horseshoe bat roost reserves in Britain and Ireland.

The Trust works with other expert specialist bat groups and organisations across Britain, Ireland and mainland Europe. VWT is represented on the EuroBats Advisory Committee, which brings together 63 states and upholds the Agreement on the Conservation of Populations of European Bats. In 2018, VWT co-hosted the 3rd European Bat House Symposium for researchers and conservationists, at which knowledge and best practice were shared across borders.

As well as delivering its own projects, VWT provides expert advice to partner organisations throughout the UK, Ireland and mainland Europe.

VWT is working hard to facilitate the recovery of greater horseshoe bat in south-east England through roost creation and habitat enhancement and is planning partnership working with local organisations and landowners.

Further information can be found at www.vwt.org.uk

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Sussex Bat Group

Sussex Bat Group (SBG) has been acting for the study, conservation and protection of bats in Sussex since 1984, with a special role in education, training and advice, and in site survey, monitoring and conservation. It is affiliated to the national Bat Conservation Trust]. SBG has expertise in working with local people, including members of public, landowners & other conservation bodies to protect and study bats in the county. The Group has expertise in site liaison and advice, field survey and monitoring, expertise for a range of study techniques, and has regional and national liaison with other bat groups.

For many years, SBG has been monitoring the presence of small numbers of greater horseshoe bats in Sussex, primarily in hibernation sites, and it was SBG members who recently discovered this highly significant breeding colony.

Sussex Bat Group is committed to supporting VWT in the ongoing management of the roost, through volunteers assisting with wardening, monitoring and maintenance.

Further information can be found at www.sussexbatgroup.org.uk

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