

Tamar Valley Centre

Tamar Valley Centre at Drakewalls near Gunnislake



Anna David explains how the bats roost and forage around the Tamar Valley

Tamar Valley Bat Trail Walk

Matt Parkins heads down from Dartmoor to explore the heritage and wildlife of the beautiful Tamar Valley

Dartmoor stands proudly over Devon as an iconic landscape of the southwest, but nestling in a nearby valley along the Cornish border, is the equally spectacular river Tamar. In the past the valley has been famous for its industry. At one time the largest copper mines in Europe dominated the landscape, both above and below ground. Later in its history the Tamar was famous for the production of top quality fruit and vegetables that were transported by rail to surrounding towns and cities, and as far as London. Today the heritage features of this Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty play a big part in the conservation of a very special species of bat. It's a rarity in the UK but the greater horseshoe bat has a stronghold in Devon and uses 11 maternity roosts in the county, so there is a new county-wide conservation project which aims to protect them and their precious habitats. The Devon Greater Horseshoe Bat Project is a 5 year partnership project of 19 organisations led by Devon Wildlife Trust and is supported by the National Lottery through the Heritage Lottery Fund, as well as other funders.

To find out a bit more about the fascinating link between the heritage and the wildlife in the area I joined the Tamar Valley Walking for Health group for a gentle 3 ½ mile (5 ½ km) guided walk. As the walkers gathered at the Tamar Valley Centre we were joined by Anna David from the Devon Greater Horseshoe Bat Project who would be on hand to explain the bat-friendly features around the landscape. Toni, our volunteer walk leader and Jean, the back-marker introduced the walk, described the easy-going route and handed back to Anna who explained that "though the walk is not actually in Devon, the colony of greater horseshoe bats in the valley regularly fly and forage on this side of the Tamar". She went on to illustrate how the landscape is "one of the best with its woodland edges, orchards and pasture. These features all attract the insects that the bats feed on and they are also known to use the healthy hedgerows and even the river itself as navigation tools". The heritage of the valley is also important as she suggested the caves, mines and old farm buildings can make excellent bat roosts. "They often prefer the disused mine shafts as they stay warmer than natural caves".



St. Andrew's churchyard at Calstock provides many good features for bats



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The walk began with a downhill stroll along the hedge lined lane where we stopped to learn about another species of bat that would feed there at night. "There are three distinct species of pipistrelle and one bat can eat up to 3000 midges in one night!"

Continuing the walk, the group got chatting about the vast views and expansive environment. One of the walkers said "I live on the other side of Dartmoor but wanted to explore the Tamar Valley. I've heard so much about it". Anna stopped again to talk about how the hedges are managed, explaining that "some are cut to leave thicker, taller sections to encourage biodiversity and provide a good stock of insects for the bats to feed on." The next stop was St Andrew's churchyard where she stood under the lych-gate to demonstrate how "Bats might use this roof while foraging. They need to rest and digest their food – you might even find bat droppings on the ground. Bats also roost in old farm buildings, particularly barns with slate roofs. The slates absorb the sun's energy, then the bats can benefit from a little extra heat".



Walk leaders make sure the walk is the right pace for everybody



The walk went on at a pleasant pace and Toni told us “this is one of the longer walks in the programme and it really shows off some of the most interesting parts of the valley”. As we descended a track through beautiful oak woods, snapshots of the river emerged between gaps in the branches and redundant stone chimneys rose above the treetops.

Dropping right down to river level, the route took us along the banks of the Tamar to the village of Calstock, lying below a mighty railway viaduct. Once we reached the slipway Anna explained how the hillside across the river would be an ideal foraging habitat. “With the orchard, hedges, woody edges and cattle pasture it’s perfect for horseshoe bats”. And then the walk was over. The bus to take us back up the hill to the start point was due in 20 minutes ... just long enough to take in the view and try out a locally made ice cream. A feast for the eyes and a tasty way to finish the day.

So, walking for health? I certainly felt good, with friendly company, fine views and lots of fresh air. I even learned a bit about bats too.

If you are interested in joining a Walking for Health group anywhere around the Dartmoor area, search for your nearest one at www.walkingforhealth.org.uk

For more information on The Tamar Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty go to www.tamarvalley.org.uk and you can find out about the Devon Greater Horseshoe Bat Project at www.devonbatproject.org ■

FURTHER INFORMATION

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Man-made features around the valley can provide shelter for bats



The banks of the river Tamar are a perfect place for greater horseshoe bats

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