

# Turning over a new leaf

Woods and trees are important to all our UK bats, and some of our rarest bats are woodland specialists depending on them for their survival. **Dr Carol Williams** explains how projects on the ground and woodland policy changes are being brought together to protect and enhance woods for bats locally and across the UK in the Bat Conservation Trust first national Woodlands Project.

It's a damp and rather chillier than might have been expected for the time of year (May) but the spirits of the group of volunteers gathered in a woodland in Norfolk are not dampened. We are there to monitor barbastelles, rare bats that use a number of tree roosts located throughout the woodland. Once a month these bats are simultaneously monitored on emergence. On this occasion the count was low, and the tree that Sonia and I were posted at drew a blank. But every count (including negative ones) adds another piece to the jigsaw. In the case of this group of volunteers, the Norfolk Barbastelle Study Group (see opposite page), the picture being assembled and the way in which this has been achieved is proving valuable in a wide range of ways.

There are other inspirational woodland projects, such as the South West Woodland Wildlife Initiative where hotspots for bats and also birds, butterflies and plants are being identified and advice will be given to landowners through jointly supported project officers. We are working with the National Trust on bats across their estates in Sussex taking a landscape scale approach and with Natural England on woodland National Nature Reserves, looking at woodland management and what it means for bats. We are increasing our knowledge about the bat species, their habitat needs and how they use the landscape which informs local practical action. But there is also a broader application of these projects; they bridge the gap between action and national policy.

There has never been a time of greater challenges but also of greater opportunity for our woodlands. A year ago the Government's Natural Environment White Paper had been published with a call for a substantial increase in woodland cover and the strategy *Biodiversity 2020* was released. Work is ongoing work to turn these policy documents into targets and plans for delivery. This is only scratching the surface of the changes but it is worth mentioning that most of the money to



Carol in the woods

meet these targets for woodland is via the Rural Development Programme that underpins the Higher Level Stewardship (administered by Natural England) and Woodland Grant Schemes (administered by Forestry Commission). In 2013 these schemes will cease and the Common Agricultural Policy is being reformed to decide what comes next in their place. This is important for the future of biodiversity in woodlands and of course the biodiversity of the wider countryside/farmed land. The decisions are being made now.

So how do two such distinct areas of work for woodlands and bats marry together? When lobbying for policy and delivery measures that will safeguard and benefit bats I have an armoury of practical approaches from on the ground surveying, monitoring and landscape scale vision for delivery that I can cite. It is clear that in delivering for bats, fragmentation of habitats is reduced and habitat quality improved, which is beneficial for a wide range of other species. The measures required by bats are also match up with helping the environment provides the good and services the environment provides to us (commonly called ecosystem services). So good for bats also means good for biodiversity and landscapes. And there's more... if bats are a flagship for so much, then by monitoring bats we can see whether the changes in policy and the management of the countryside are

proving beneficial or detrimental. Indeed the effort by that marvellous band of volunteers that carry out year on year monitoring via NBMP or other projects mean that bats become an indicator of these changes.

So next time you are in a soggy woodland with bats making a no show, or carrying out a transect that due to its location gives consistently poor numbers of passes, it really is all worthwhile. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts and without the dedication of all volunteers we would not be able to give evidence and lobby for a better future for bats and people. And to those of you who love bats but don't think you know enough to take an active part, take inspiration from the Norfolk Barbastelle Study Group story overleaf and join the growing band of people who spare as little or as much time as is right for them to be a part of the future for bats and all biodiversity.

There is no doubt that the next decade will be a time of change. For woodlands I believe there has not been a greater time of opportunity. And so I look to the future with excitement but also in the knowledge that for woodlands and bats there is so much more yet to do. We need more monitoring; more evidence; more collaboration; more advanced portrayal of findings; more lobbying and more support for our volunteers who make so much of this possible.