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Defenders of Ukrainian Bats

An unprecedented program challenges misplaced fears

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The first large, systematic bat-education program in Ukraine used an array of colorful and informative posters, leaflets and pocket calendars to challenge long-standing misperceptions of bats as "devilish, nocturnal" animals that threaten public health. With support from BCI's Global Grassroots Conservation Fund, we focused on three urgent threats in and around Kharkov, the third-largest Ukrainian city with about 1.5 million residents.

We also conducted educational programs for children in 10 Young Naturalists clubs in and around Kharkov, especially in areas with at-risk bat habitats.

Public attitudes about bats in northeastern Ukraine and nearby Russian territories never recovered from the tragic rabies death 20 years ago of a child bitten by a bat. Although this is the only bat-related rabies fatality ever documented throughout the region, public health and veterinary officials promptly added bats to their catalog of most-dangerous animals.

Bats remain on that list today, and public officials still equate them with danger in official leaflets, meetings and television interviews. As a result, many Ukrainians view bats with revulsion and fear. A group of Kharkov National University students and I, an associate professor of biology, set out to change that.

We identified three specific "hot spots" where bat-friendly information was urgently needed and where we felt our intervention could be most effective. These are:

• **Bats in Forests:** Supervisors of forests around Kharkov were mostly unaware of the importance of bats in maintaining healthy timberlands and gave them little thought when harvesting timber and managing woodlands. A critical issue was the preservation of large, hollow trees needed for roosts.

• **Bats in Summer Cottages:** Before the Soviet Union ended, thousands of people obtained small plots of land, built summer cottages and planted small orchards. These new "villages" sprouted in especially scenic areas with forests, streams and lakes. Used mostly on weekends and holidays, the cottages are usually empty and very attractive to bats – much to the owners' chagrin. Bats that move into attics and other parts of cottages are often simply killed, although a few enlightened owners live with them quite happily.

• **Bats in Windows:** Europe's largest and most northeasterly population of hibernating common noctule bats (*Nyctalus noctula*) is in Kharkov, where most spend winters in buildings of Kharkov National University. The bats hibernate in deep crevices of the walls. During the fall and spring migrations, however, groups of up to 100 bats often attempt to fly through windows at the university. Because of the windows' design, many of these bats become trapped between the frames, where they frequently die. Our group tries to save these bats whenever possible, but our resources are limited.



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Our first step was to design and print 4,000 pocket calendars, most with a photo of one of eight local bat species on the front. The calendar-cards identify the bat and briefly describe its value and conservation needs. Other calendar styles illustrate issues of bats in buildings and bats and forest management. The idea was to provide a handy bat-education tool that people would keep for months. The calendars proved very popular, and we included some with most of our education kits and when delivering lectures.

Next, we designed posters aimed at protecting the university bats and those that live in summer cottages. The university posters describe why these windows are potentially deadly traps for so many bats, what people can do to prevent them from being trapped and why we should care. They also explain what students should do to safely help the bats escape. "The university is a center of education and culture," the poster states, "and should not become a cemetery for wildlife."

We hung these posters in university areas that are most popular with students and at hostels where many students live. We also distributed calendars and leaflets, which describe in more detail the bats, their values and how the window threat can be minimized to students, in areas of especially high risk and to various departments of the university.

We distributed hundreds of the cottage-bats posters, plus calendars and leaflets, at vacation communities in areas of known or likely bat habitats. These materials stress the importance of bats, especially their role as predators of insect pests, and explain why bats should be accepted rather than killed. We also urged residents to ensure forest roosts are protected or even improved. During the fall migration, when bats are on the move, we met with residents and put posters on community bulletin boards.

Packets of Bats in Forests posters, calendars and other material were given to local forestry districts, where we discussed bats' values and roosting needs with officials.

Meanwhile, in 2008, a major renovation was undertaken at the historic Gosprom building, a monumental structure in downtown Kharkov that was the first skyscraper in the Soviet Union when it was built in 1928. Workers discovered a large colony of noctule bats roosting in a wall crevice of the building. Our group was not in Kharkov at the time, but local animal-protection organizations rescued the bats.

Immediately upon our return, we launched a major education effort among construction crews and people who work in the building. Now we are notified whenever bats are found inside Gosprom and can handle safe exclusions. We also periodically inspect the building and have located and excluded colonies.

Last summer, we visited Young Naturalist clubs at five schools in Kharkov and others in the nearby communities of Pervomaysky, Izum and Volchansk and at the Kharkov Zoo. We delighted the youngsters by adding bats to their list of valuable animals that need protection. We even conducted several evening field lessons with ultrasonic bat detectors.

Alona Gukasova and Daria Elagina worked with students at the Summer School for Young Nature Conservationists at a regional national park. These students, already active in protecting Ukraine's natural world, clearly enjoyed learning the facts about our long-misunderstood bats.

We directly reached several thousand people during the program and most seemed receptive to our message. Thousands more have seen our posters, leaflets and calendars.

Our bat-conservation efforts, however, are only beginning. The educational resources we developed with BCI's support and our current momentum will serve us well in the future.

We hope that we have achieved the goal we set when we began this effort: "In the near future, a forester will not cut down a hollow tree, a pensioner will not disturb bats in the attic of a cottage, and a professor will save the bats trapped in a classroom window."

And we'll still be there working and educating about the invaluable bats of Ukraine.

ALEXANDER V. NAGLOV is Associate Professor of Biology at Kharkov National University. ANTON VLASCHENKO, a BCI Scholar (see BATS, Fall 2008) who recently received his Ph.D. at the university, was part of the education team and contributed greatly to this article.

This pioneering bat-conservation program was made possible by Anton Schindler, in loving memory of his wife, Valerie. You can help grow bat conservation around the world by donating to BCI's Global Grassroots Conservation Fund at: www.batcon.org/grassroots.

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