

## VOLUME 24, NO. 1 Spring 2006

### Protecting the City Bats of Romania

Homegrown conservationists struggle against old prejudices

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City bats are under attack in Romania. At least 10 bat species roost in urban homes, buildings, stadiums and bridges nationwide. But they are detested by the humans with whom they share cities. In the absence of knowledge, ancient myths feed baseless fears, and bats are deliberately killed whenever possible. Roosting sites are demolished. As the economy improves, more and more buildings are being renovated – and bats trapped inside are usually left to die. Newspapers recently praised the killing of more than 200 bats when a stadium was remodeled.

But at least in the city of Cluj-Napoca, a local group is championing the cause of bats, with education as the key. Armed with a BCI Global Grassroots Conservation Fund grant and other funding, the Focal Centre for Biodiversity and Monitoring (FCBMC) has mounted an aggressive campaign, teaching people of all ages about the values of bats, offering free help in humane exclusions from buildings and even training youngsters who take to the streets in bat costumes to educate their elders.

The public-education drive still faces great challenges, but at least some city dwellers are beginning to get the message. And now local newspapers and television programs are noticing the children's efforts and occasionally sharing their message with the public.

Situated 200 miles (400 kilometers) northwest of Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca is one of Romania's most important cultural and industrial centers. Our research has identified eight species of bats within this city, including the particolored bat (*Vespertilio murinus*), serotine bats (*Eptesicus serotinus*), pond myotis (*Myotis dasycneme*), European greater myotis (*Myotis myotis*) and brown big-eared bat (*Plecotus auritus*). These bats forage within the city and along its streets, around the Somes River and area lakes and in the green areas that surround the city.

These species, as their natural habitats disappeared, have adapted to life in Cluj-Napoca, and their survival now depends on the critical habitats they find in human-made structures. The destruction of roosting sites, deliberate or otherwise, leaves surviving bats homeless and forced to seek shelter elsewhere – often in residents' homes.

That's where a lack of knowledge becomes lethal. Like most other Romanians, Cluj-Napoca residents seem ignorant of even the most basic facts about bats. Our conversations indicate that adults and children alike are convinced that bats attack people and become tangled in their hair, leaving victims no option but to shave their heads. Most consider bats disgusting and favor killing them. Such myths endure because there has been no place in Cluj-Napoca where people can obtain accurate information about bats.

The FCBMC is working to provide the facts and pave the way for much broader conservation efforts.

As a first step, a team of scientific advisors and I established a bat-information center at the

FCBMC headquarters in downtown Cluj-Napoca. The center's knowledgeable staff welcomes anyone with questions and concerns relating to bats to drop by or telephone the center for brochures, answers to specific questions, and especially advice and help in humanely excluding bats from buildings. We publicized the center with fliers, posters at bus stops and other sites and through announcements on local radio and television stations.

Team members offer assistance to any person or business dealing with bat-related problems, whether it's a single bat entering a home or a colony trapped inside a building. The service, even going to the site to handle the exclusion, is free. The team has been called to handle only a few cases involving individual bats in private homes, but that it was consulted at all is a big step forward. And in some cases, we convinced the flat owners to "cohabitate" with their bats, leaving them to their roosts in exterior building cracks, while covering the windows with mosquito nets to avoid flying visitors indoors.

We have mostly aimed our education campaign at children, in whom attitudes are less firmly fixed. Using colorful visual aids and interactive presentations, we visited 12 classes at George Cosbuc National College, one of the best grade schools in Romania. The classes emphasized the positive roles bats play in the city and why and how we should protect them.

The children were divided into small groups, each named after a native bat species. Each group did independent work on its bat, making paper bats and posters and designing classroom presentations. Some helped make simple bat-exclusion devices. A priority in these classes was to build enthusiasm for bats among the children so they can become bat ambassadors among adults.

One especially effective aspect of the program involved a class of 29 children who distributed brochures to Cluj-Napoca residents. Most were dressed in bat costumes (black tights, black T-shirts and caps with bat images and a black cloak). They became enthusiastic promoters of our "friendly bat" concept, not only handing out information, but politely introducing themselves to passersby, explaining why they were on the sidewalks and asking for help in protecting Cluj-Napoca's bats. They clearly charmed most of the adults they encountered. And several newspapers and a television station that had been reluctant to publish FCBMC materials or even attend press conferences (since bats are not a "hot story") began praising the children's efforts.

Along with the education campaign, we are also monitoring the city's bat populations, gathering data on urban species and their preferences for roosting and nursery sites and feeding habitat. We mapped the city's green areas, watercourses and other bodies of water. We discovered one neighborhood that was particularly popular with roosting and feeding bats. It was located between a green hill and the river and consisted mostly of old, flat buildings with deep cracks in the walls that formed perfect roosts for bats. We will be giving special attention to this neighborhood in the future.

Since this project began three years ago, we have noticed some improvement in the attitudes of Cluj-Napoca residents towards bats. We did not expect miracles, and found none. But we find a definite increase in the number of citizens seeking our help with bats, rather than just killing them without a thought. More and more people are also turning to the center with general questions about bats and showing the awakening of a newfound interest in conservation.

We hope this will become the foundation on which we can eventually build vigorous bat conservation within the city. Much remains to be done. But we are beginning to do it.

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