

Did you know there are at least 200 bats from 11 different species living in the woodland around Greenham Common?

These are just some of the findings of this ambitious project run by the Berkshire and South Buckinghamshire Bat Group.

The investigation is led by the group's projects officer James Shipman.

James, a 37-year-old who works for a tree planting and relocation company called civictrees.co.uk and lives in Great Shefford, has been fascinated by the unique, harmless and often misunderstood creatures for more than a decade.

He went along to one meeting of the Berks & South Bucks Bat Group in 2010 and has been hooked ever since.

"I saw one little bat and that was it," he said.

"During the day you'll see birds, butterflies and things like that, but at night no one ever seems to stop and think that if you look up above your head you've got this whole world flying around and no one has any idea that's going on."

I joined James along with a party of 15 others, made up of both interested novices and bat-handling veterans, as he carried out one of his summer fortnightly bat box checks in Bowdown on a warm July morning.

The Bowdown Woods project, which began in 2008, has seen the installation of 50 bat boxes in the woodland around Greenham.

The boxes are artificial roosts designed to encourage bats into areas where there are few roosting sites.

In the first box James checked, he discovered a young female soprano pipistrelle bat about the size of a thumb that hadn't been ringed before.

James figured she was about six to eight weeks old.

Meet the real BATMAN

Berkshire and South Buckinghamshire Bat Group is currently investigating two separate bat populations in Bowdown Woods. CAMERON BLACKSHAW went along to a group talk to find out more about the nocturnal creatures



As he gently handled her, measured her forearm, placed a ring on her wing and took down her details in his logbook, he showed us how to tell the difference between male and female bats. He told us that the hair on newborns tends to be darker and shorter, while more mature bats have longer, more ginger-like hair. He also explained that a typical bat lives on a diet of mosquito-sized insects and will eat around 3,000 of them in one evening.

Ecologist Heather Gardiner travelled all the way from Somerset to attend the bat box check. She is working towards getting her bat licence, which would grant her permission to handle and study the creatures. She said about being able to see the bats up close: "It's something a bit different. You can't do it on your own if you're not licensed and James knows his stuff. "If you want to learn about bats, come here."

In the second box check, James found two older soprano pipistrelles, one male and one female, and he theorised that the female could be the mother of the bat found in the first box due to its close proximity. James recently helped put up six bat boxes in Marsh Common near Welford, a project organised by Welford Parish Council. Welford Parish Council chairwoman Martyne Ellard came along to the box check and said: "It was brilliant to



To find out more about the Berks & South Berks Bat Group project and any future events visit www.berksbats.org.uk/

come here today to see the established bat boxes, the amount of bats that are in them and how protected and cared for they are." Two bats of a different species were found in the final box check we witnessed. Two male long-eared bats, noted for the large size of

their namesake. James is hoping the research the Berks & South Bucks Bat Group is carrying out in Bowdown will establish a few interesting findings, such as the colouration of pipistrelles changing depending on the season and the weather. He also wants to discover whether the two separate populations in the woodland interact with one another. But most importantly, he hopes that projects such as this one will change the negative preconception that

many people have about bats in this country. "A lot of people can show that they're quite scared of bats or other flying things, but I am convinced that you can persuade 95 per cent of people to find an interest in or show some kind of happiness towards bats," he said. He strongly encouraged anyone who was interested in the fascinating flying creatures to contact their local bat group or wildlife trust and get involved.