

Bats and the Norwich Western Link Road

When the NDR, now known as the Broadland Northway, was built it stopped at the Fakenham Road. This was because to link it with the A47 would involve crossing the Lower Wensum Valley which is an area of outstanding wildlife conservation value. It was necessary first to conduct extensive ecological surveys to determine how best to minimise damage to the biodiversity of the area.



Looking west up the Wensum Valley from Alderford Common

Bats form a particularly important component of the biodiversity of this area. All species of bats are protected by law in the UK, a special licence is required from Natural England to do anything which might disturb or harm them or their habitat in any way. Ecological surveys in the Lower Wensum Valley have revealed that nine different species of bats occur there, including Daubenton's, Natterer's and Brown long eared bats (all of which hibernating in the lime kiln on Alderford Common) but also Common and Soprano pipistrelles (commonly found in churches) and the two larger species Serotine and Noctule bats. The most exciting discovery has been the presence of the extremely rare Barastelle bat, one of the UK's rarest mammals and one of the rarest bats in western Europe.



Noctule in flight (Finding nature.co.uk)

One of the reasons why Barbastelle bats are so rare is that they have very specialised habitat requirements. They need very long established woodlands to shelter behind flakes of bark on old trees during the day and holes, cracks and crevices in which to bring up their young in summer and in which to hibernate in winter. They hunt, mostly for large moths, around the edges of woods, along riverbanks and over pasture meadows. They are very faithful to both sheltering sites and feeding grounds with very rigidly fixed commuting routes between them, returning to the same sites and routes year after year.



Barbastelle bat (Pinterest.co.uk)

This makes it very difficult to mitigate against the effects of building a four lane highway through their habitats. The gantries over the Broadland Northway have helped reduce mortality of some bat species but there is no evidence that either they, or "green bridges", are used by barbastelle bats. Detailed surveys by observers and using automatic recorders have revealed that the colony of barbastelle bats in the lower Wensum valley is the largest remaining colony in the country and is composed of a number of subgroups which interact and exchange members, so damage to any one sub-group would harm the whole of this internationally important population.

Radio telemetry studies show they have large home ranges (approx. 6.5 km diam), the ranges of members of this Wensum colony extending into both Swannington and Alderford parishes. Two colonies that used to breed in the Felthorpe Woods were lost when the Broadland Northway was constructed, showing how vulnerable they are to this type of habitat disruption. It is therefore essential for the Norfolk County Council to review plans to build the Norwich Western Link road where there is such a high risk of it irreversibly damaging the largest and most important colony of this species in the whole of the UK.

For further details of potential effects of the proposed NWL development on Barbastelle bats please see [Appendix 1](#)

For a broader perspective of this issue from the Bat Conservation Trust please see: <https://www.bats.org.uk/our-work/biodiversity-policy-advocacy/position-statements-1/bcts-position-statement-on-the-proposed-norwich-distributor-road-western-link>

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