



Keeper takes rejected Egyptian Fruit Bat babies under her wing.

Deputy Section Head of Primates, Natalie Horner, has taken on the role of surrogate mother to two abandoned Egyptian Fruit Bat babies at Cotswold Wildlife Park. This is the first time Natalie has hand-reared these nocturnal mammals and, according to Park records, it is also the first time this species has been hand-reared at the Burford collection.

The babies, also known as pups, were discovered on their own when the Bat House was undergoing a major revamp. Natalie explains: "A couple of days after we moved all of the Bats into temporary holdings, while we refurbished the Bat House, we saw both babies roosting by themselves. Mother Bats often 'park' their babies to give themselves a break. So we left them for a day, in the hope their mums would come and collect them again, as the chances of the babies surviving without a feed and warmth are very slim."

Their mothers never returned so the decision was made to hand-rear them in order to give the pups, named Bruce and Wayne, the best possible chance of survival. Natalie became their surrogate mother and took them home where they could be given around-the-clock care. At this time, they were around four to six weeks old and weighed forty grams. Unable to maintain their own body temperature, they were kept in an incubator for two weeks and monitored closely by Natalie. Hand-rearing these tiny winged-mammals was no mean feat. A lot of time and effort was invested in the newborns which hopefully would result in not only their survival but their eventual reintroduction to the colony. Natalie said: "I had to feed the babies every three hours in the early days. They were given milk as well as mashed fruit. The first feed of the day was at six o'clock in the morning and the last feed was at midnight."

Feeding soon became one of Natalie's favourite parental duties. She explains: "One of the things I'll never forget was wrapping the babies in their blankets for feed times. Wrapping them up gave them comfort as their mother would wrap her wings around them to keep them safe. As soon as they finished their feed (and sometimes during) they would fall asleep wrapped in their blankets. It really melted my heart." A video of Natalie feeding the babies is available to watch here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IN_EcQtp-kA.



As they continued to grow, and in order for their wings to develop properly, she encouraged them to fly. Natalie said: "When they were around ten weeks old we began flying lessons. This was great fun. Bats instinctively know how to fly so they just needed a little bit of encouragement. I would hang them from my finger and gently bob them up and down to encourage them to wing beat. I hung towels and sheets on the walls of my spare room (pictured left) to give plenty of roosting opportunities. The first lesson went as expected - they flapped their wings and flopped straight on the floor! They quickly recovered though and it didn't take long at all for their muscles to strengthen and for them to fly from one side of the room to the other. From then we had nightly flying lessons. As soon as they were able to fly comfortably around my spare room they were upgraded to their own enclosure at the Park before being reintroduced to the colony."

Bruce and Wayne developed into strong young Bats and the day Natalie had been hoping for finally arrived. Natalie said: "By the time the Bats were six months old they were fully self-feeding and very strong and capable flyers. They are still only half the size of the adult Bats but shouldn't have any problems integrating and competing for food. So the decision was made to reintroduce them to the rest of the colony. There wasn't much preparation needed so the Bats were put into transport bags and taken to the Bat enclosure. Once taken out of the bags, I placed them on my finger for one last time and watched them fly off to rejoin the rest of the colony. They both flew a couple of circuits of the enclosure before roosting with the rest of the colony. It was such a proud moment for me and such a happy ending to what had been four amazing months. To see the babies back with their family made all the hard work worth it. I'm so happy for them to be back where they belong."



The tiny survivors are testament to Natalie's dedication as their keeper. Looking back on her time as their surrogate mother, she said: "Hand-rearing Bruce and Wayne was an amazing experience. To care for them, help them grow and develop into strong, healthy Bats and then reintroduce them back to their colony was incredibly rewarding. Bats are fascinating animals and are important plant pollinators and seed dispersers. It's been great to raise awareness for these misunderstood animals and hopefully we've been able to change some opinions and generate more love for these wonderful mammals."

Additional information

- Bats are the only mammals to possess wings and manage to sustain flight.
- Egyptian Fruit Bats (*Rousettus aegyptiacus*) carry their single offspring continuously until it is able to fly itself.
- Egyptian Fruit Bats are amongst the most vocal of all bat species.
- They live in large colonies of around one thousand individuals.
- In addition to the Egyptian and Seba's Fruit Bats on show in the Bat House, the Park is also home to the Rodrigues Fruit Bat. This critically endangered species is found only on the small island of Rodrigues in the southern Indian Ocean (900 miles east of Madagascar). A free-flying colony of these rare mammals can be seen inside the Tropical House.

Cotswold Wildlife Park opens its doors at 10am every day[†], with last admission at 3.00pm^{††} - ENDS - For further information, please contact Debbie Ryan, Press Officer, Cotswold Wildlife Park on 07787 133837 or email ryan.debbie@gmail.com. [†]Except Christmas Day ^{††}4.00pm during summer months.

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