

New records of rare forest bats in the Iberian Peninsula

Jorge Sánchez-Balibrea¹, Ángel Guardiola¹, Sarah Díaz-García¹ & José Manuel Zamora-Marín¹

¹ANSE, Naturalist Association of the Iberian Southeast

Corresponding author: murcielagos@asociacionanse.org

INTRODUCTION

Bat forest species are considered among the most poorly known bat species in the Iberian Peninsula¹. The Iberian distribution range of these bat forest species is mostly drawn from isolated records, thus precluding a robust knowledge of their habitat preferences and current distribution. However, several recent studies have provided novel and extensive data for the Iberian northern populations²⁻²⁰, whereas the status of these species remains unknown in the southern half of the Iberian Peninsula and only some records have been reported^{3,6,21-24}. This study provides new locations of *Barbastella barbastellus*, *Myotis mystacinus*, *M. bechsteinii* and *Nyctalus leisleri* in the Iberian south-eastern, thus notably expanding the distribution range of these forest-specialist bat species in mainland Spain.

M & M

Between 2019 and 2021, a total of 66 sites were surveyed over the study area (Fig. 1e) in the framework of two ongoing bat research projects. These sites were surveyed through passive acoustic surveys ($n=75$, SM4BAT FS and Audiometer), mist netting or harp trapping in small waterbodies ($n=50$), visual inspection of potential roosting sites ($n=21$) and infrared video cameras used at dusk in roosting sites ($n=3$, SONY FDR-AX700 connected to a Pettersson D230 detector).



FIG 2. Representative pictures of the main types of surveyed habitats in the Iberian southeast. Mist nets were usually placed over traditional small waterbodies (a), as well as along bat crossing areas in riparian forests (b).

RESULTS

We confirmed the presence of these four rare forest bat species in 20 locations from the Iberian south-eastern: 18 for *B. barbastellus*, three for *M. bechsteinii* and one for *M. mystacinus* and *N. leisleri* respectively (Table 1, Fig. 1f-i). During mist netting, we trapped 23 *B. barbastellus* belonging to both sexes and age classes (adult and juvenile), including seven lactating and post-lactating females, three *M. bechsteinii* (two adult males and a post-lactating female), two *M. mystacinus* (adult males) and one *N. leisleri* (adult male). The remaining reported records were provided through passive acoustic surveys for *B. barbastellus*, but also through direct observation of at least two bats belonging to that species.

Bat surveys were conducted in mountain and riparian forests from north-western Murcia, south Albacete province (Castilla-La Mancha) and north Almería province (Andalucía; Fig. 1e). Landscape is dominated by mountainous areas (altitude range: 600-2050 m. a.s.l.) with scattered habitat patches devoted to rainfed agriculture and extensive cattle farming. Forests are mostly composed by pine (*Pinus nigra*, *P. pinaster*, *P. halepensis*) and some dominant Mediterranean scrubland species (i.e. *Quercus rotundifolia* and *Juniperus thurifera*), with a lower contribution of other broadleaf trees (i.e. *Q. faginea*, *Q. pyrenaica*, *Acer granatense* and *Corylus avellana*). In addition to these mountain forests, mature riparian forests also occur in the close vicinity of two main rivers (Mundo and Segura) and some small streams (Tus and other tributaries), and are mostly composed by *Populus* sp., *Salix* sp., *Fraxinus angustifolia* and *Ulmus minor*²⁵⁻²⁷. Furthermore, drinking troughs, artificial pools and other types of traditional small waterbodies are still abundant in the study area and they are managed by local people for farming or cattle-raising purposes.

STUDY AREA

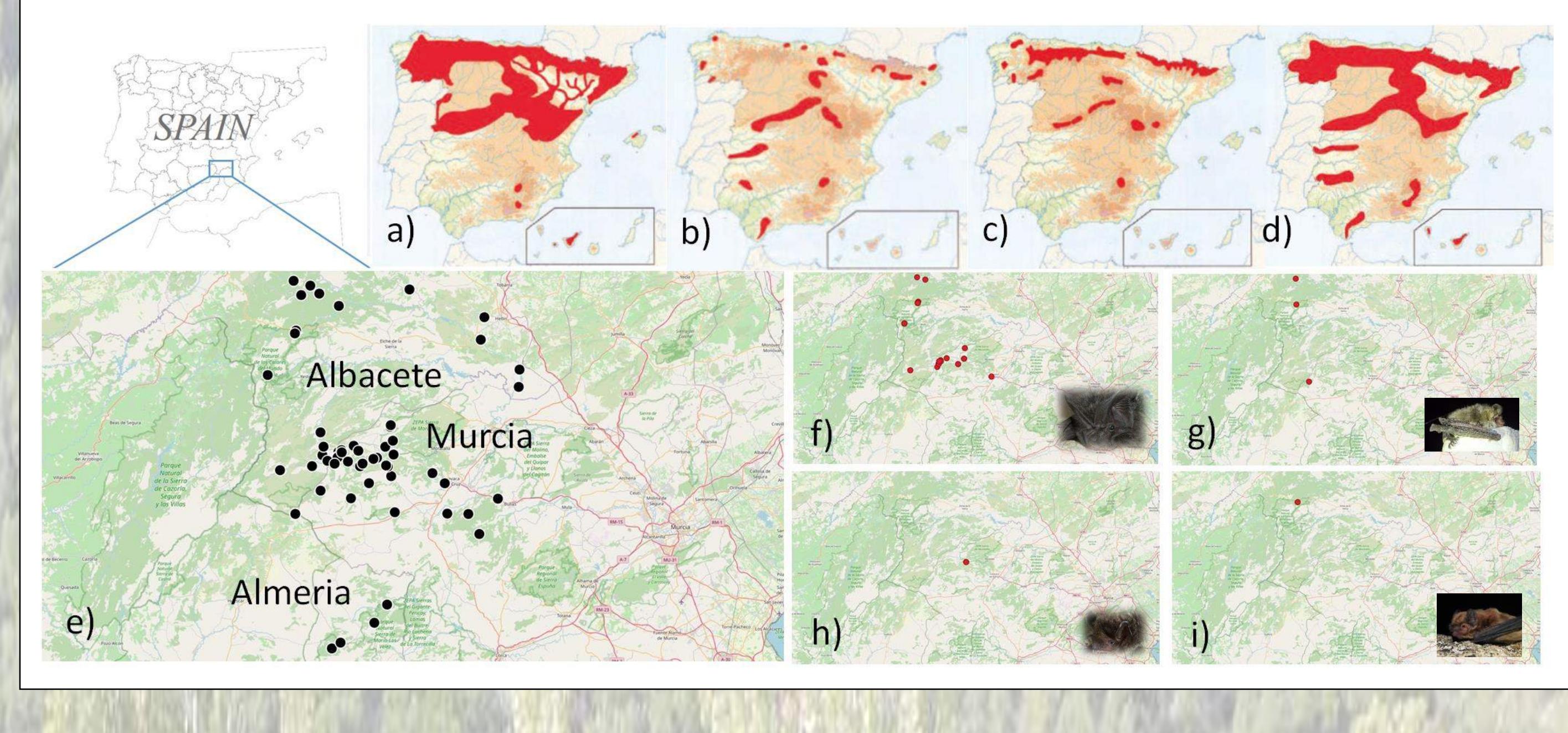


FIG 1. Map of the study area in the Iberian southeast and location of the surveyed sites. Above maps show the most recent distribution, previous to this study, for the four forest bat species (a: *B. barbastellus*; b: *M. bechsteinii*; c: *M. mystacinus*; d: *N. leisleri*; extracted from Guijé & Campodón, 2018). Below maps show the location of the surveyed sites (e) and the new reported records for the four bat species (f: *B. barbastellus*, g: *M. bechsteinii*, h: *M. mystacinus*, i: *N. leisleri*).

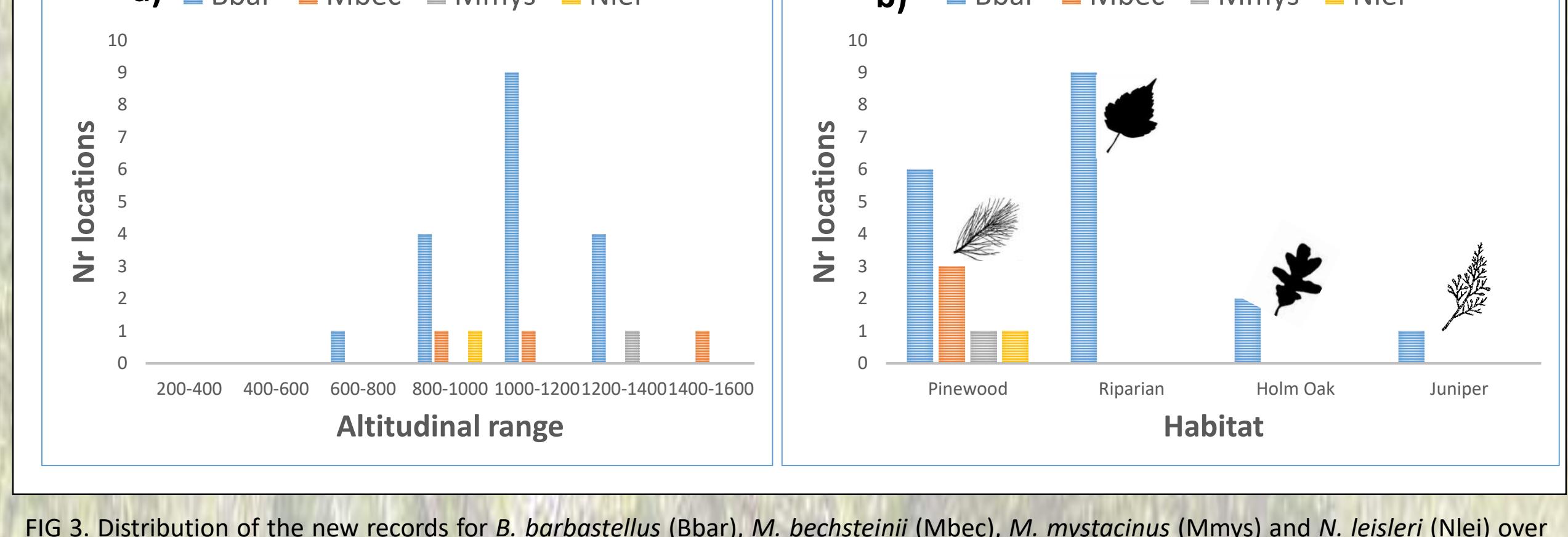


FIG 3. Distribution of the new records for *B. barbastellus* (Bbar), *M. bechsteinii* (Mbuc), *M. mystacinus* (Mmys) and *N. leisleri* (Nlei) over an altitudinal range (a) and at different habitat types in the Iberian southeast.

DISCUSSION

These four bats are forest species particularly scarce and understudied in the Iberian Peninsula. Their current distribution is restricted to mature forests of mountainous areas from the Iberian northern half (Fig. 1a-1d), though isolated populations are also known for the southern regions⁶. In our case, an increased survey effort in non-prospected potential areas and the application of combined sampling methods allowed us to effectively detect these rare forest bat species (Fig. 2a-b). To our knowledge, these records comprise the first data of these species for the Region of Murcia and among the first for Albacete province, and they contribute to expand northward and eastward the distribution range from the Andalusian populations in Cazorla, Segura and Castril (spatially connected with the study area²⁹). Moreover, *B. barbastellus* recently cited in Fuentes del Marqués (Table 1), is now the eastern limit of its Iberian southern populations. Captures of post-lactating females and juveniles from mist netting suggest the breeding status of *B. barbastellus* and *M. bechsteinii* in the study area.

The altitudinal range of these new records (Fig. 3a) is similar to the observed pattern in other regions of the Iberian Peninsula. *M. mystacinus* occurs at altitudes higher than 900 m in Mediterranean areas³⁰ and our records for *M. bechsteinii* are close to the higher altitude limit reported for that species^{24,31-34}. Additional inferences in relation to *N. leisleri*, detected elsewhere between sea level and 2150, are precluded by the limited data. According to previous studies³⁵, *B. barbastellus* was detected in a wide altitudinal range. Our observations meet also the habitat preferences described for these bat species in other regions of the Iberian Peninsula^{30,32,35,36}, occurring in mature forests dominated by broadleaf tree-but also pine-species from mountainous areas. Pine forests comprised the habitat type with higher values of frequency of occurrence for the study bat species (Fig. 3b), which is probably due to the great landscape surface occupied by this habitat type over the study area. Because of riparian forests are naturally scarce in the study area, old poplar plantations (*Populus* sp.) could provide suitable roosting sites for these forest-specialist bat species in the study area^{36,37}. Furthermore, our results suggest that small waterbodies act as key landscape elements for bat communities in semiarid regions, as well as bat surveys over these isolated habitats could be used to improve bat inventories and increase species detectability.

Location	UTM Coordinates (30 S)	Altitude m.a.s.l.	Province	Habitat	Date	Mist netting	<i>Barbastella barbastellus</i>		<i>Nyctalus leisleri</i>		<i>Myotis bechsteinii</i>		<i>Myotis mystacinus</i>	
							Passive acoustic survey	Visual inspection	Mist netting	Mist netting	Mist netting	Mist netting	Mist netting	Mist netting
Vado del Tus	548983 4247108	820	Albacete	<i>Pinus pinaster</i>	29/4/2019-17/5/2019		x							
Arroyo Tercero 1	569606 4226531	1.081	Murcia	<i>Populus nigra italica</i>	09/08/2019-14/08/2019		x	x						
Fuente de los Almeces	567733 4227289	1.084	Murcia	<i>Celtis australis</i> <i>Juglans regia</i> <i>Quercus rotundifolia</i>	07/09/2019		x							
Rincón de los Huertos	583201 4233553	1.260	Murcia	<i>Quercus rotundifolia</i>	08/09/2019		x							
Cerro del Castellar	569682 4225932	1.165	Murcia	<i>Pinus halepensis</i> <i>Pinus nigra</i> <i>Salix purpurea</i> <i>Salix eleagnos</i> <i>Juglans regia</i>	09/09/2019		x							
Arroyo Tercero 2	567831 4225997	1.079	Murcia	<i>Populus nigra</i> <i>Populus canescens</i>	10/09/2019		x							
Molino de los Tornos	582816 4227596	1.037	Murcia	<i>Populus canescens</i>	10/09/2019		x		1					
Rambla de la Rogativa 1	568429 4224645	1.026	Murcia	<i>Populus nigra italica</i> <i>Juglans regia</i>	13/10/2019	1 male	x							
Rambla de la Rogativa 2	568544 4224505	1.044	Murcia	<i>Populus nigra italica</i> <i>Juglans regia</i>	10/09/2019		x							
Río Taibilla 1	552569 4220881	1.240	Albacete	<i>Populus sp.</i> <i>Quercus rotundifolia</i>	24/07/2020		x							
Río Taibilla 2	552555 4220816	1.240	Albacete	<i>Quercus rotundifolia</i>	24/07/2020	1 male								
Balsa de la Guitarra	556429 4258616	986	Albacete	<i>Pinus nigra</i> <i>Acer sp.</i> <i>Quercus rotundifolia</i>	27/07/2020	5 male 7 female 3 indet.	x							
Arroyo de la Celadilla	556732 4259384	926	Albacete	<i>Pinus nigra</i> <i>Acer sp.</i> <i>Quercus rotundifolia</i>	27/07/2020		x							
Calar de la Santa Cortijo de Quirante	572975 422775	1.218	Murcia	<i>Juniperus thurifera</i>	28/07/2020		x							
Fuente Mellinas	579485 4224511	1.195	Murcia	<i>Pinus pinaster</i> <i>Quercus rotundifolia</i>	30/07/2020-3/08/2021	2 female								
El Estanque	555975 4273057	1.126	Albacete	<i>Pinus pinaster</i>	01/08/2020	1 male				1 female				
Puerto Hondo	563876 4215296	1.427	Murcia	<i>Pinus nigra</i> <i>Populus sp.</i>	15/08/2020		x				1 male			
Río Madera	560595 4271765	987	Albacete	<i>Populus sp.</i> <i>Fraxinus sp.</i>	23/08/2020		x							
Fuentes del Marqués	598392 4217680	640	Murcia	<i>Platanus sp.</i> <i>Populus sp.</i>	05/04/2021		1							

TABLE 1. List of the new locations for the four study bat species in the Iberian southeast. Coordinates, altitude, province and main habitat types are provided for each record, as well as the sampling method through which the bat species were detected. For direct sampling methods (mist netting and visual inspection) bat counts and sex-ratio are provided.

With the support of:



BIBLIOGRAPHY: 1. Guié, D. & Roca, E. 2018. Cuadernos arborícolas o especialistas forestales. Pg. 41-85 en: Guié, D. & Camorron, J. (Eds.) Manual de conservación y seguimiento de los quiebros forestales. Organismo Autónomo Puebos Nacionales. Ministerio para la Transición Ecológica. Madrid. 2. Berlanga, J. 1996. Distribución y abundancia de los quiebros forestales en la Comunidad de Madrid. Boletín de la Sociedad Botánica de Madrid. 3. Schreiber, 1774. Historia general de la flora de la Provincia de Murcia. Ed. 1. Murcia. 4. Aguirre-Arellano, P. & T. Iñaki, C. 2012. Primeros datos sobre la distribución de *Myotis daubentonii* y *M. myotis* en el Parque Natural de las Sierras de Cazorla, Segura y las Villas. Ecología. 33(1): 53-61. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02104485.2012.673022> 5. Bañuelos, S., Bernal, B., Alarcón, S., & Aguirre-Arellano, P. 2012. Sistema de gestión de los parques de Murcia y su impacto en la conservación de la biodiversidad. Ecología. 33(1): 1-20. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02104485.2012.673021> 6. Rodríguez, J. 2018. La presencia de *Myotis daubentonii* en la Sierra de las Nieves (Málaga). Boletín de la Sociedad Botánica de Andalucía. 33(1): 1-12. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02104485.2018.1390001> 7. Aguirre-Arellano, P. & J. L. Martínez, J. 2014. Confirmada la presencia y reproducción de *Myotis bechsteinii* en el Parque Natural de las Encinas de Ronda (Jaén). Boletín de la Sociedad Botánica de Andalucía. 39(1): 1-12. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02104485.2014.896002> 8. Aguirre-Arellano, P. & J. L. Martínez, J. 2014. Nuevas citas para la presencia y reproducción de *Myotis daubentonii* en el Parque Natural de las Encinas de Ronda (Jaén). Boletín de la Sociedad Botánica de Andalucía. 39(1): 13-18. <a