

## VOLUME 25, NO. 4 Winter 2007

Bats, Kangaroos and Glow Worms

Founderâ€™s Circle Ecotour to Australia & New Zealand

The sight is breathtaking. Thousands of huge bats, their graceful wings spanning three feet (1 meter) or more, sail directly overhead. Waves of grey-headed flying foxes, their bodies silhouetted against the deep-purple sky, rise from the surrounding forest at dusk and fly low over the handful of BCI members gathered on a bridge across a deep gorge at Australiaâ€™s Ku-ring-gai Bat Reserve. â€œThis,â€ says Les Meade of Lexington, Kentucky, â€œis the second-best emergence of bats that I have ever seen. Number One is the emergence [of 20 million Mexican free-tailed bats] at Bracken Caveâ€ in Texas.

And that was just the first night of BCIâ€™s 2007 Founderâ€™s Circle Ecotour of Australia and New Zealand â€“ a 17-day expedition that featured a stunning array of habitats ranging from a tropical rainforest to a geothermal wonderland to the underwater magic of the Great Barrier Reef. â€œWe didnâ€™t do museums and cathedrals,â€ said Mary Read of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. â€œWe just always headed for the wildlife. It was wonderful and very rare.â€


Australia and New Zealand are rich in some of the worldâ€™s most unusual wildlife â€“ as well as at least 75 bat species, some of them unique. The travelers marveled at encounters with kangaroos, wallabies, sugar gliders, a wild assortment of possums, colorful parrots, bowerbirds and other birds, kangaroo-like pademelons, little bandicoots, even a duck-billed platypus (a rather bizarre egg-laying mammal). The focus, of course, was on the bats, including nights of netting and up-close observation, as well as visits to inspiring Australian and New Zealand conservationists dedicated to protecting them.

The Ku-ring-gai Bat Reserve is a still-wild oasis tucked into an upscale suburb of Sydney, Australia. During the day, as many as 30,000 of the grey-headed flying foxes (*Pteropus poliocephalus*) hang like Christmas ornaments from the towering trees that have survived urbanization. The forest that shelters this flying-fox colony was about to become a subdivision in the mid-1980s. Local conservationists and scientists organized the Ku-ring-gai Bat Committee and leapt into action. BCI Founder Merlin Tuttle went to Australia two decades ago to help make the case for preservation. (Tuttle, as always, led this Founderâ€™s Circle Ecotour.) The forest and its bats were protected and the committee has been working tirelessly to protect the area ever since. Committee members described their work to the Founderâ€™s Circle visitors.

A four-day stay at Trish and Terry Wimberleyâ€™s unique flying-fox rescue and rehabilitation center on Australiaâ€™s Gold Coast was a special highlight for a number of the Founderâ€™s Circle members. â€œThis was the most amazing place,â€ said Miriam Schulman of Los Angeles. â€œThey are first and foremost an animal hospital that cares for many, many bats, but they also take in other wildlife. They have a surgery center and a nursery for orphaned baby bats.â€

The baby flying foxes â€œare adorable. Theyâ€™re very affectionate. They snuggle against you and make little noises. They feel just like little kittens with wings.â€ The tiny orphans are wrapped in swaddling blankets, which, Schulman said, â€œmakes them feel



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secure since theyâ€™re normally tucked up under their motherâ€™s wings and held quite tightly.â€ Theyâ€™re fed with tiny baby bottles and even have â€little pacifiers that Trish makes for them. These tiny creatures would melt the heart of the sternest skeptic and turn him into a bat lover.â€

â€We enjoyed the ambience at large: the surrounding forest, with the varied animals, reptiles and birds that were cared for in the clinic with bats hanging everywhere,â€ said Connie Kruse and Tommy Angell. They cited â€the added attraction of a frog chorus one night during a lighting storm, and the ever-friendly greeters at the door: Picka and Boo (the two dogs) and a duck named Dorothy. Every day was a new experience.â€

The Wimberleysâ€™ property of rolling hills, forests and streams is especially rich in wildlife. â€We probably saw more wildlife at their place than at any other single place we visited,â€ Meade said. And the abundance of bats was impressive. â€We netted across a stream under a canopy of low-growing trees,â€ Schulman said. â€The myotis bats were hitting our net faster than we could get them out.â€ The most unusual bat encountered on the trip probably was the endangered short-tailed bat (*Mystacina tuberculata*) found only in New Zealand. It has evolved into one of the most terrestrial of bats; several were netted, examined and released. New Zealandâ€™s other bat species, the long-tailed bat (*Chalinolobus tuberculatus*), was trapped around roosting caves. These two insect-eating bat species are the only native land mammals in the island nation.

â€One of the most extraordinary things we did in New Zealand was visit one of the [Waitomo] glow-worm caves,â€ Schulman said. Entered by boat, the dark, silent cave featured â€a huge, cathedral-like domed ceiling covered with thousands and thousands of little pinpricks of yellow-green lights â€“ the glow worms.â€

The worms are larvae of the New Zealand fungus gnat. They spin nests out of silk and leave threads, covered with a sticky mucous, hanging loose like snares. The larvae emit a bioluminescent glow to attract insect prey, which become stuck on the threads. The effect, Schulman said, is â€like little diamonds hanging down from the cave. It is very beautiful and very magical.â€

The tour was limited to the northern half of New Zealandâ€™s North Island, where some members were struck by the extent of deforestation in certain areas. â€It was very sad,â€ Schulman said. â€Forests were clear-cut and then monocropped, mostly with Monterrey pines, so that previously rich forests were replaced by row upon row of only young pines. Some areas had only stumps sticking up.â€ To Mary Read, the lost forests drove home the message that â€destruction of native trees and forests is a terrible problem around the world. You come away realizing how important education is to tell the story of bats.

â€This was a fabulous trip. Everything about it was wonderful,â€ she said. â€We covered a lot of ground, but everything was so well-timed that we had plenty of time to see everything we wanted to see. And I came away just amazed â€ and very charged up about bat conservation. It was wonderful to see the devotion of so many people.

â€Thank goodness for the women who banded together to save the forests and flying foxes [of Ku-ring-gai], and for the Wimberleys and the people at the Tolga Bat Hospital, where high school kids come after school to hand-feed the bats and clean the cages. It was an eye-opening experience.â€

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