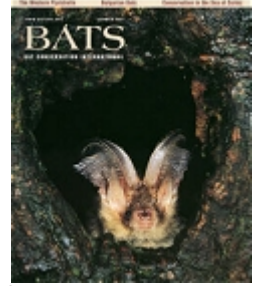



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Guyanese Villagers Discover Bats

Surveying for bats in remote regions of Guyana, South America . . .

Rebecca Shapley



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Mount Kowa is an isolated plateau topping out at 4,000 feet, cut off from the surrounding forest by sheer rock walls. My partner, Adrian Barnett, and I came here because even the field guides had question marks about the animals found in this region known as the Potaro Plateau. Our team's two-month expedition would include a survey of mammals from many altitudes and habitats. I was in charge of bats.

We flew into the Guyanese jungle, landing at Kaieteur Falls, then traveled up the Potaro River to Chenapou. There, following the villagers' advice, we set mist nets next to the local village shop/disco/pub. The building's tin roof sheltered Pallas' mastiff bats (*Molossus molossus*). A crowd of all ages gathered around the nets as we disentangled the bats. We were providing splendid entertainment!

The shop-owner ran his generator and provided light for us. While most of our spectators had seen bats flying at night, they had never viewed them closely. They were surprised to see us measure them, peer at their teeth, take notes, and then let them go. Most villagers viewed bats as pests. But, as one local diamond miner said proudly, "This may look funny, but this is science!"

Netting along creeks, we found the tiny tufted bat (*Rhynchonycteris naso*), which is about the size and weight of a peanut with wings, a long snout, and tufts of white hairs spaced along its forearms.

After leaving the village, we hiked through the forest for seven days, stopping at Tappa, a mining concession headquarters with a small shop and farm. The owner, BeBe, showed us the blood stained wooden rails where her chickens perched at night-definite signs of vampire bats.

Just before dusk, we set two nets next to the chicken coop. Again, people emerged to watch. That night, the bats caught in the act of raiding the chicken roost were common vampires (*Desmodus rotundus*). I showed the first one to BeBe. It was a pregnant female. As a guest on BeBe's farm where the bats plagued her animals, I hesitated, and asked permission to let it go. "She's pregnant?" asked BeBe. "Let her go." BeBe was apparently sympathetic with the particulars of being female in the jungle.

The next morning we continued on our uncharted way, through a gorge, and finally arrived at the top of Mount Kowa, where we spent 10 days at the summit.

In a cave along the gorge, we discovered a family of nine striped fruit bats, which we identified as El Dorado broad-nosed bats (*Platyrrhinus aurarius*). One became our guest for a night. After being captured and measured, she decided to sleep on our hammock string rather than immediately fly away. We also later netted both varieties of yellow-shouldered bats (*Sturnira lilium* and *S. ludovici*) on the mountain top.

Although our short list of bats and other small mammals contained few surprises, the information was hard earned and helped fill in the question marks about the region's species. But in the end, the experience was also about conservation. Each time we weighed,

measured, and studied a bat, we learned more about them, and shared our appreciation for these night-flying creatures with the villagers who live in this forest habitat and can make a lasting difference in the survival of these invaluable allies.

Rebecca Shapley is a graduate of BCI's Bat Conservation and Management Workshop in Pennsylvania. She conducts bat species surveys in the rain forests of Central and South America. Recently she received a grant from BCI's Global Grassroots Bat Conservation Fund to support work in Jaú National Park, Amazonas, Brazil. She hopes to use a satellite phone and the Web to take school classrooms along on future trips.

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