

## VOLUME 22, NO. 1 Spring 2004

Amazing Southern Africa

A BCI Founder's Circle trip to a magical place

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After witnessing the staggering spectacle of 8 million straw-colored fruit bats taking wing from just 2 1/2 acres of African forest, BCI Science Advisor Paul Racey wanted to draw international attention to this incredible wildlife resource. So, upon his return from Zambia's Kasanka National Park in December 2002, he urged BCI Founder Merlin Tuttle to come photograph the bats.

Bat Conservation International went even further, organizing a Founder's Circle trip to southern Africa with a focus on the fruit bats of Kasanka. The trip, featuring Malawi and Botswana, as well as Zambia, promptly sold out, and last November Merlin and I set off with 12 participants on an unforgettable African adventure.

Our trip took us to Mvuu Camp on the Shire River in Malawi, where we had the novel – if somewhat disconcerting – experience of rescuing mist nets from errant hippos, but not before capturing a large slit-faced bat (*Nycteris grandis*). The rewards for day and night drives, hikes and boat trips were up-close views of a great variety of big and small game at Mvuu.

We also visited a pair of luxurious game camps in Botswana's Okavango Delta, where we watched cheetahs and African wild cats – and came almost too close to a pride of lions that had just killed a full-grown hippo. Private planes took us from camp to camp, where excellent local guides enhanced our journeys. By day, some of us focused on the colorful diversity of birds, while others sought out exotic plants or Africa's legendary big game.

We all enjoyed evenings spent mist netting bats at isolated water holes or in patches of riparian forest. We caught 19 species of bats, including the rare Botswana long-eared bat (*Laephotis botswanae*) and the beautiful Rueppell's pipistrelle (*Pipistrellus rueppelli*). Each stop on our tour charmed us with its own special character and wildlife, but the undisputed highlight came when we arrived at Kasanka and visited the straw-colored fruit bat colony at its peak density.

Some notes from my field journal:

**November 15, 2003, 2 p.m.:** Heidi Rich-ter, a biologist studying the flying foxes, accompanies us to the colony. From more than a kilometer away, bat sounds fill the air. Soon the shapes of numerous large bats on the wing can be seen. We pass through a patch of forest where many of the trees are dead – an older roost site, now abandoned for lack of shade – and then reach the active colony. The bats pile up several deep on every branch. The outermost bats stretch, groom, argue and take flight, then everyone reshuffles, searching for shade or just a place to hang. Some end up roosting just a few feet above ground. I have never seen tree-roosting bats packed so densely or so active by day. There are two small blinds where we can be in the midst of the colony without disturbing them.

**6:30 p.m.:** Sunset. Standing in an open area by a small river, I turn 360° and each and every horizon is literally filled with bats. Some are flying low, directly overhead, flapping



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slowly and gracefully with their long thumbs extended. All are heading out to find fruit in the surrounding forests. We watch until it is too dark to see, but still bats are pouring past on all sides.

We spent our last night in Africa in a deluxe hotel above Victoria Falls, a fitting finale to our unique African adventure.

Fiona A. Reid leads BCI trips and workshops to a variety of destinations. She hopes to return to Kasanka with another BCI members group.

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