

Samoans Turn Out for Flying Fox Count

The status of two species of flying fox, *Pteropus samoensis* and *P. tonganus*, has been of interest to BCI since its founder and Science Director Dr. Merlin Tuttle, BCI member Dr. Paul Cox, and Board member Verne Read and his wife, Marion, visited Samoa in January of 1985 to urge the Governor and Territorial Legislature to provide protection for these beautiful creatures. As a result of this visit, a law prohibiting commercial hunting and export of bats from Samoa was passed by the Territorial Legislature (*BATS*, December 1986).

Popular interest in flying foxes has continued to grow in American Samoa, culminating in the first annual bat count on Saturday, September 26. Bill Knowles, wildlife biologist for the American Samoan Government, who conceived the idea for a count, reported that the count had two goals. "The first was to count all the individuals of *Pteropus tonganus* found at accessible roosts and to use this information to generate a population estimate for the species. The second was to involve the public in our program and to increase their awareness of the wildlife and rain forest."

Over 100 concerned citizens journeyed in small teams in the early hours of the morning to flying fox roosts throughout the island. The office of Marine and Wildlife Resources also had sea-going vessels count roosts in inaccessible parts of the North coast of Tutuila Island. Estimates of the number of bats in each roost were made simultaneously throughout the island at 9:00 A.M. After the count, the teams returned from their various stations to enjoy a barbecue sponsored by the Office of Marine Resources and to receive a complementary T-shirt.

Concerning the count, Rick Davis from the American Samoan Department of Education reported, "I have yet to see more positive energy and enthusiasm directed towards conservation during the years I have lived in Samoa. Young and old, Samoans and òPalagiò [expatriates] shared a marvelous experience in counting the bats."

Governor A. P. Lutali also rose early to participate in the count. "I hiked in the forest to help with the count and received a T-shirt along with everybody else at the barbecue," he explained. "The flying foxes are such marvelous creatures, I don't know if I'll ever be able to eat another one," he added with a smile.

Biologist Knowles agreed in the positive assessment of the program. "The second goal of increasing the public's awareness of wildlife conservation in general, and flying fox conservation in particular, was an unqualified success. I estimate that about 100 people participated in some manner with 60 people signing up to go out and count bats. At the barbecue afterwards I saw only smiles and heard favorable comments. Even people who went on particularly strenuous hikes were happy that they went. Perhaps the best indication of the success of the count was the demand for T-shirts. There is no doubt that the public's awareness of the need to conserve both species of flying foxes on this island increased as a result of the bat count and that there is considerable positive momentum for our program."

Bat Conservation International commends the American Samoan Government, particularly

Governor A. P. Lutali, Biologist Bill Knowles, and the director of the Office of Marine and Wildlife Resources, Ray Tulafono, for setting a sterling example to other Pacific nations, and indeed to the entire world, on how to marshal public support for bat conservation.
Thornhill

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