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Expedition Opens Door for Bat Studies in China  
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*by Debbie Buecher*

China has more reserves of limestone than the rest of the world combined. Since limestone is where caves are formed, it seems reasonable to assume that China would also have a large proportion of the world's cave bats. Unfortunately, there doesn't appear to be much written in Western literature about the bats of this vast country, although historically bats have been much more favorably viewed by the Chinese than the Western world. The Chinese have long revered bats as symbols of good luck and prosperity.

Since China opened its doors to the West in the 1970's much information has been compiled about China's people and land, and active exchange programs with scientists and businessmen have become common. Little research had been done, however, on the caves or bats of China. The Cave Research Foundation (CRF), a non-profit research organization devoted to the study and preservation of caves and karst (areas of limestone formations), was therefore invited to lead the first American caving expedition to the People's Republic of China in March 1988.

Twelve participants spent three weeks exploring some of the country's caves and sharing information with their Chinese counterparts at two major cave research institutions. Of the eleven Americans and one Canadian, three were BCI members: Ronal Kerbo, one of the authors of "Bats of Carlsbad Caverns" and the cave specialist for Carlsbad Caverns National Park; myself, and my husband, Bob.

The CRF-China Expedition worked in northern Guangdong province, southern Hunan province and in the Guangxi region, an area where the limestone forms giant spires and towers. The trip through Guangxi was especially exciting for cave enthusiasts, with six or more cave entrances visible in every tower. From a bat's point of view, this could be considered "roost heaven."

The most interesting area we found to observe bats was near Wah Hua Yan Cave, a commercial cave just a few miles outside the city of Chenzou in southern Hunan province. Every evening bats of varying sizes and types foraged around the buildings where we were staying, dipping and gliding over the natural pool in the cave entrance. They didn't appear to be roosting in the cave, but seemed to congregate from the surrounding hillside to take advantage of the stream.

We identified a larger bat species that also foraged around the hydroelectric plant near the entrance of Wah Hua Yan Cave. Any time of the night we could go outside and hear them "chirping" as they flew, since their echolocation fell within the human audio range. There are only five species of bats known to echolocate within this range, and of these, only bats of the species *Taphozous* (tomb bats) occur through Southeast Asia and South China. Another species observed by the survey teams was *Rhinolophus*, which roosted in the caves in the area around Wah Hua Yan. Commonly known as horseshoe bats, all seen by the expedition were roosting as solitary individuals. In Xhenyuan Cave there appeared to be

two separate types, as the two observed were quite different in size.

One of the more humorous experiences during the expedition happened on market day at the end of a boat ride on the Li River. All twelve of us disembarked from the ferry and spread out among the vendors on the dock looking for "bat paraphernalia." It was difficult to relay to the Chinese that we wanted anything they had with bats or "bien fu" on it. They, of course, thought we were mispronouncing some other word (why would Americans want articles with bats on them?), so we finally resorted to flapping our arms in an effort to communicate. The merchants might now think that all Americans want items with bat designs; it will be a grim reality if they have to wait for another Western caving expedition to sell the bat merchandise they stocked especially for American tourists!

Although we didn't have a chance to observe any large bat colonies, we did make contact with the Chinese scientists best able to have an influence on future programs affecting bats. During our stay, we presented BCI's slide program, "Bats: Myth and Reality" through a translator, to an enthusiastic and receptive audience at the Karst Institute of Geology in Guilin. This first expedition was just the beginning. The participants from both the U.S. and China were so pleased with the cooperative effort that another expedition is being planned for 1990. At present in China, there are very few scientists studying bats or their conservation needs. The next expedition will include greater emphasis on bats and hopes to conduct censuses and to investigate status trends. BCI has been invited to participate.

*(Bio)*

*Debbie Buecher and her husband, Bob, are both cave cartographers interested in bat conservation. They are BCI members and live in Arizona.*

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*BCI member Debbie Buecher presents Mr Zhang (center) and Prof. Wang (right) of the Karst Institute of Geology in China with BCI's publication, "The Importance of Bats."*

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