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A Year of Filming Bats Around the World

Get ready for an extraordinary Survival Anglia documentary about bats. . .

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Over 40 hours of footage are in the can, and editing has begun on the first film ever produced about bats and their critical role in diverse habitats around the world. Filming wrapped up in Austin this summer after more than a year of hard work. For most viewers, what they see and learn will be totally new, showing them an aspect of bats they might never have imagined. The documentary also will emphasize conservation and education efforts, highlighting the work of Bat Conservation International.

The film is being produced by Survival Anglia, Ltd. and will air in the United States on CBS this fall. Dieter Plage, who filmed the documentary with his wife, Mary, has been making wildlife films for Survival Anglia for over 20 years, winning many awards for his work. He was recently featured in a Survival Special on CBS entitled "The Most Dangerous Game," which showed some of the more perilous aspects of filming wild animals. Merlin Tuttle, as Scientific Advisor to the documentary, planned the itinerary and accompanied the Plages to locations around the globe.

Although most wildlife films that the Plages make also take at least a year, this experience was unusual for them. Instead of staying in one location to film a single area or species, filming bats entailed traveling to eight countries and 11 different locations in the United States, transporting 1,000 pounds of fragile equipment in and out of customs, sometimes staying no more than a few days in one location before moving on to the next. In addition to the many time zone changes, the crew of three also had to adjust to a year of irregular sleeping to film at night when bats were active. They encountered conditions from intense heat and humidity to torrential rain and the noxious ammonia-saturated air of caves from Texas to Thailand.

Dieter Plage has patiently and painstakingly filmed many animals, including mountain gorillas, orangutans, leopards, elephants, and birds, but this was his first experience with bats. Although he had always been aware that bats were important, he never realized just how vital they were to global ecology and mankind until he had filmed them interacting within diverse ecosystems throughout the world.

Most of the footage shot for the documentary is the first of its kind. One of the most exciting moments for both Dieter and Merlin was filming a woolly false vampire bat (*Chrotopterus auritus*), a bat so rare that even bat biologists who spend their entire careers studying bats in the New World tropics might never see more than one or two individuals in a lifetime. One of the few carnivorous species, the bat was filmed in Costa Rica catching a large lizard from a vine.

While in Kenya, the crew captured on film the courtship display of Gambian epauleted bats (*Epomophorus gambianus*), some 20 feet up in the trees. Courting male bats, "honking" to attract females and flashing tufts of fur (called epaulets) on their shoulders, had to be acclimated, along with the responding females, to the bright lights needed for filming. It

took real skill and effort to get the bats accustomed to the lights, but the crew accomplished it in only 30 hours, a remarkable feat in the wild.

Flying foxes and other fruit and nectar -eating bats will be seen in a variety of situations, emphasizing their key role in the renewal of rain forests and their importance to cash crops in developing countries. Bats will also be shown catching many types of prey, from insects to fish. Some sequences document behavior long known, but previously unseen, such as that of pallid bats (*Antrozous pallidus*) catching and eating scorpions in the southwestern United States, while ignoring repeated stings.

Filming the documentary was an adventure in itself. In Singapore, Dieter and Merlin survived eating eggs cured in horse's urine, but Dieter completely lost his appetite another night when fried rat was served at the next table. In Thailand, the crew slept on bare floors in a Buddhist monastery room that monks usually reserved for preparation of the deceased (they were forced to stop filming for several days when a monk died, and they had to move out). On their last night in Thailand filming dawn bats (*Eonycteris spelea*) pollinating durian flowers in an orchard, their driver commented how brave he thought Dieter and Merlin were. Uncertain about what the driver meant by "brave," they asked if he was referring to their jumping canals in the dark or climbing the large durian trees. The driver simply and solemnly said, "Many cobras."

Filming a colony of short -tailed fruit bats (*Carollia perspicillata*) inside their tree roost in Costa Rica also proved to be a challenge. After bushwacking for most of a day through dense jungle, Merlin finally found a likely hollow tree roost, but the hole at the base was a mere slit, barely large enough for a person to squeeze through. He entered cautiously, headfirst, holding his headlamp before him, not sure what he might encounter in an area known for venomous snakes such as bushmasters and fer-de-lance. Fortunately he found just what he was looking for: a colony of several hundred short -tailed fruit bats. To film them, Dieter had to squeeze his large frame through the hole with camera and lights, handholding both in the confines of the hollow tree while filming the bats some 20 feet above.

Eight different families and 35 species of bats were filmed. Although they might not all make it into the final cut, the film is now a one-of-a-kind record of bat behavior that can be drawn upon for many years to come. Editing 40 hours of extraordinary footage down to a one -hour documentary will be a challenge. It is likely that after the film's first run, the additional footage will be edited into a series of half-hour documentaries for broadcast worldwide. Survival Anglia films are seen in 102 countries.

Perhaps more than any other media, nature films bring appreciation and understanding of wildlife and the world they (and we) live in. Since bats are seldom seen by most people, a factor that fuels misunderstanding, the documentary will go a long way toward changing misperceptions and attitudes about bats.

Be sure to watch your local CBS listings for date and time this fall. At press time, an air date had not yet been finalized, and a title had not been selected. Pending how much advance notice BCI is given, we'll do everything we can to let our members and friends know when they can see this exciting film.



*Dieter Plage (right) and Merlin Tuttle hold umbrellas while filming tiny Honduran white bats (*Ectophylla alba*) in a Costa Rican rain forest. The bats, snug in their tent roost, have their own umbrella: a *Heliconia* leaf. Dieter filmed the bats under the leaf using a "periscope" on his camera.*



*Merlin Tuttle (left) hands Dieter Plage his camera as Dieter squeezes through a hole in the base of a hollow tree to film the short-tailed fruit bats (*Carollia perspicilla*) inside.*

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