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Into the Rain Forest

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by Sy Montgomery

Her coat was the color of lichen--grizzled yellowish grey--and so soft that my fingers couldn't even feel it. Her nose was long and pointy, like the snout of a poodle. But what took my breath away was the animal's size: this adult female, who was capable of flying for miles at speeds faster than a cyclist can peddle, was only an inch and half long. She weighed about four grams, less than two pennies. Here was a hummingbird of a bat, a tiny jewel of a mammal.

We had caught the proboscis bat, *Rhynchonycteris naso*, in the mist net we'd strung up earlier, spanning a shallow stream in the dry tropical rain forest at Lomas Barbudal. She was only one of dozens of individuals of seven species we caught that night, and we caught, handled, and watched dozens more on the 10-day trip; but of all the bats we encountered, to me, she was the most wonderful. Perfection is rendered yet more exquisite in miniature: her 32 pointed teeth, her tiny, curved toenails, her flexible thumbs all seemed more miraculous considering her moth-like weight.

After a quick but careful look, I opened my fingers to set her free. She didn't move. For nearly 15 minutes, the tiny bat rested on my open, ungloved hand. Some fellow bat enthusiasts, eager to see the animal fly, urged me to throw her into the air; but I let her choose. She chose to wait.

Eventually my own clumsiness evicted her. In the steamy darkness, I stumbled on a root, and feeling the shock, she flew away. I felt her spring to flight, her arms pushing off like a cricket's legs.

Before BCI's May expedition to Costa Rica, I had never held a live bat before. They had fascinated me, though. They seemed to me the closest thing to angels the natural world has to offer: mammals, like us, yet they can fly. Living in New England, the only species I had ever seen--and even then, they whizzed by at dark, too fast to identify--were little brown bats. All of the United States and Canada offers only 40 bat species, most of them in the South.

Costa Rica, by contrast, is a bat-lover's paradise: the small Latin American country boasts 108 bat species, representing about 10% of all bat species in the world, and half of Earth's bat families. More than 50% of all the mammalian species in Costa Rica are bats--and an even larger percentage of individuals are bats.

One reason the country is so bat-rich is its variety of habitats. Just below Monteverde's dream-like cloud forest, where epiphytes trail from trees like wizard's beards, we mist-netted *Desmodus rotundus*, the common vampire bat, and several species of fruit bats. At Lomas Barbudal, a biological reserve, we met moustached bats, yellow-shouldered bats,

more fruit bats and vampires, and the lovely little *Rhynchonycteris naso*. At Tortugero, we watched fishing bats hunting; pinpointing promising ripples with their sonar, they seize fish with their strong feet, carrying them to a nearby roost to eat.

Owing to our large group--we were 22 people, including our tour leader, BCI's Director of Special Projects Dr. Paul Robertson, and Dr. Richard LaVal, a well-known bat specialist and local naturalist--intimate observation of terrestrial animals was difficult. The night I held the *Rhynchonycteris*, though, was doubly magical; while the others munched sandwiches at a picnic table, my friend Liz Thomas and I snuck off to watch howler monkeys bed down for the night in the trees.

Yet our noise and number did not prevent our seeing scarlet macaws copulating in a tree, lively leaping troupes of howler and white-faced monkeys, and scores of birds, reptiles, and invertebrates. (We also learned how to sex millipedes.)

A trip like this rewards richly with the unexpected. Of all the beautiful and bizarre lives we observed, perhaps most incredible was one we saw at staggeringly close range: a three-toed sloth who was crossing the dusty road to Turrialba. He was quite large, 21 inches head to tail and weighing perhaps 12 pounds, with a face alarmingly like that of a person who has just begun to awaken from a very long and complicated dream. We offered him a branch, and he slowly sniffed each spot before placing his marvelous long foreclaws there. Before our bus passed, we carried him, clinging to the branch, to the other side.

[bio]

*BCI member Sy Montgomery is a science and nature writer. Her book, *Walking with the Great Apes*, the story of primatologists Jane Goodall and Dian Fossey, was published earlier this year.*

See insert in this issue for details on the next BCI natural history tour to Costa Rica. The trip will be strictly limited to 18 people. Last year's trip filled quickly, so be sure to register early to avoid disappointment!



The rare opportunity to see a three-toed sloth slowly making its way across a road was one of the trip's most unexpected delights.



Above: Trip participants listen with rapt attention as Richard LaVal (right) lectures in the Monteverde Cloud Forest.



Below: One of the highlights of the trip was getting to see numerous species of bats up close. Cindy Marks of Treasure Island, Florida, holds a tiny fruit bat. She learned how to handle bats through BCI workshops.

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