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Batting About Belize

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by Emily Malino

There's a fishing bat," Merlin called out excitedly, focusing his powerful torch on this delicate creature with long outstretched wings, swooping and circling in huge arcs over the still waters of the Mopal River in Belize. Tiny droplets of water fell from its wings as the creature dipped repeatedly into the river to catch fingerlings. As we watched quietly, the bat made one more large circle, skillfully avoiding our fine net strung across most of the river as it flew off into the black night.

"I hoped we'd catch that critter," Merlin said, disappointed. Merlin Tuttle, the founder and executive director of BCI, led our group of bat enthusiasts through a series of adventures in the wilds of Belize this past spring—bird watching and exploring by day, and by night, getting down to the serious business of netting bats.

It all began at the Houston International Airport, as 11 people from all over the United States joined BCI's special Founder's Circle trip to Belize, an 8,800-square-mile Central American country with a population of only 235,000. From the first moment it was obvious that this was going to be a very different wilderness trip, as we transferred from Continental Airlines to the cigar-with-wings that Tropica Airlines uses to fly to Gallon Jug and our first stop, Chan Chich Lodge.

Chan Chich is a small river that winds through tropical rain forest in the northwestern part of the country, the word, meaning "little bird", from an old Mayan song. But Chan Chich today is also a beautiful, comfortable lodge built five years ago. Surrounded by grass-covered Mayan tombs, and planted with brilliant *Heliconia* and ginger, the lodge consists of a circle of thatched *casitas* in a Mayan plaza dating back to 250-800 A.D. Green and red parrots screech overhead by day, and howler monkeys roar at night, taking visitors back two thousand years to a feeling of pristine wilderness.

Our days were taken up with long walks in the forest, exploring the ruins, and swimming in the Chan Chich River to get a close-up look at the proboscis bats (*Rhynchonycteris naso*) clustered in a harem on the underside of a tree trunk overhanging the river. They looked for all the world like lichen on the bark. "A perfect example of cryptic color in nature," Merlin explained.

In early evening we set up the mist nets made of nylon so fine that the echolocation system of bats often fails to pick it up. We suspended the nets, about seven feet wide and 40 feet long, between telescoping aluminum poles, which we plunged into the soft earth near the river along trails used by bats as flyways. At dusk, we opened the nets, turned off our headlamps and flashlights, and in deep silence awaited the first bats. The night was black; no moonlight penetrated the canopy of the rain forest.

Almost at once Merlin saw a bat struggling in the net, a great fruit-eating bat (*Artibeus lituratus*), identified by its white striped head and bright yellow tragus (an upright projection of skin at the base of the external ear). Then, in quick succession, we caught a yellow-shouldered bat (*Sturnira lilium*), a proboscis bat—a tiny long-nosed bat (perhaps one from the harem over the river), a short-tailed fruit bat (*Carollia perspicillata*), two more *Artibeus* species, and a black myotis (*Myotis nigricans*), which weighs less than some insects. Each bat was identified by species, sex, age, and its principal food—whether fruit, insect, or nectar—and then quickly released, unharmed.

For two nights we netted bats, bringing some of the most interesting kinds back to the lodge in white net bags, which we hooked on a chord safely above the ground. After we finished our dinner, we examined the bats on the comfortable porch of the dining lodge to the intense interest of the other guests. On the second evening, we netted a tiny *Vampyressa pusilla*, a fruit eater that was very hungry. Merlin fed it on papaya until it had enough strength to take to the air. Much to our delight, the tiny creature sat calmly on a branch near us, grooming itself with care, then flying off at leisure to its fellows in the darkness.

After Chan Chich we left for a three-day visit to the mountainous, cooler part of Belize, at Chaa Creek Lodge in the Cayo district. By day we canoed the Mopal River to the small dusty town of San Ignacio, then continued by van and hand-cranked ferry across the river to Xunantunich, a series of Mayan pyramids dating from 150 A.D. One of them, El Castillo, at 135 feet is among the tallest buildings in Belize.

Another day we walked the medicine trail of Panti, where modern homeopathic medicines for numerous ailments are made from 30 or 40 trees grown there. At night we netted bats at the river, wading through two feet of water under a starry sky, watching the fishing bats elude our nets. We did, however, net a vampire bat (*Desmodus rotundus*) and brought it up to the dining room of the lodge, where the other guests looked on in some shock as Merlin handled it with a glove and then released it. Someone asked why a bat would sit so trustingly in a human hand. "Once they're confident that we don't intend to eat them, they calm down," Merlin answered.

Netting on the Mopal River also produced another short-tailed fruit bat, this one carrying a tiny infant; the amazing creature was flying with a baby half its own weight. We also netted two long-tongued bats (*Glossophaga soricina*), nectar feeders which we fed sugar water before releasing. Merlin calmed each bat, including the vampire, so that within seconds the small animals sat calmly on his outstretched palm, basking in the warmth of his hand, and our admiration for their intelligence and composure, before flying off into the still, dark night.

BCI Founder's Circle member Emily Malino wrote a syndicated column on design and has had feature articles in the New York Times, Washington Post, and New York Daily News. She has also visited Costa Rica with BCI.



*Getting to see tropical bats up close is one of the unique features of BCI nature tours. The author displays a round-eared bat (*Tonatia bidens*) that Merlin Tuttle (left) has netted with help from the group.*



One of the highlights was observing how tiny proboscis bats are camouflaged against a tree trunk hanging over the river. Spotting them takes a trained eye.

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