

## Emergence Count Malaysian style

In the last issue of the newsletter, we tempted fate by announcing that Michelle was off to do some bat research in Borneo. Fate retaliated by making it impossible for her to get a work permit in time. But a little thing like that ain't gonna stop Michele.

Read on, we defy you not to drool as you read her account of Malaysia's Mulu National Park.

After receiving the disappointing news that I would have to wait until next year to participate in the Malaysian bat project, I decided to console myself with a trip to Malaysian Borneo, for a small taster. Borneo need no introduction as a wildlife lovers dream orang-utans, macaques, proboscis monkeys, crocodiles, hornbills, bearded pigs, turtles... the list is endless. I am sure Bob and Jude have a few wildlife stories of their own to tell about meeting all these fantastic creatures, so I wanted to write about what was on the top of my "to do list" – a visit to the bat caves of Gunung Mulu National Park in Sarawak, described in the guide books as a "true wildlife highlight" and a "sight not to be missed" and I was not disappointed!

Mulu is remote, the only way to get to the park is by plane so I left the town of Miri to board the tiniest aeroplane for a short 25 minute flight to Mulu (yes, I realise I have some serious carbon offsetting to do). As we flew out from Miri, the landscape was dominated by acre upon acre of



bland, uniform oil palm plantations. Fortunately, the landscape soon changed dramatically into lush dense primary rainforest as we entered the unspoilt wilderness of Gunung Mulu National Park.

Safely grounded, the next transport option to the park was less comfortable. How many tourists can you fit into a twelve-seater non air-conditioned minibus? Well, in Malaysia that would be about sixteen.

I arrived just in time for that evening's tour of the show caves – Lang and Deer cave, the latter being home to 2-3 million wrinkled lipped bats. I couldn't wait! At 2160m long and 220m deep Deer cave and Lang cave form the worlds largest cave corridor (Ref. Lonely Planet, 2006). Lang cave is the smaller of the two with amazing cave formations of stalagmites and stalactites. Few bats live in this cave and I was lucky to spot two different species in the roof crevices. After pouring over my guidebooks, I am in

agreement with Bob about how difficult it is to try and identify them using the guidebooks. The small cluster of bats look like cave nectar bats, but I won't embarrass myself by



*Microbat in Lang Cave* trying to identify the microbat. After Lang cave we entered the gigantic and impressive Deer cave. Even before we reached the cave entrance there was an overpowering smell of ammonia. Deer cave is huge. And it smells! But it is a most impressive sight and best of all it is home to what is estimated at between two to three million wrinkle-lipped bats (members of the free-tailed bat family). Can you imagine trying to do an emergence count? Deer cave is so called because the

guano produced by the bats is high in salt, which attracted large numbers of deer from the area that came to feed on the guano for salt. This in turn, attracted a large number of hunters who came for the deer. Hunting is now prohibited in the park.

When I entered the cave, a handful of bats were flying around, taking advantage of the afternoon's insect pickings. As you follow the boardwalk, which takes you right through the cave, the chattering gets louder and when you look up, the ceiling is full with bats. Unfortunately, the ceiling is so high that it is hard to actually make out that they are bats (but the smell and noise are a bit of a giveaway). Instead you can see large dark shadows formed by the mass of bats.

As well as the wrinkle-lipped bats, other species occupy the caves and surrounding forest. The park has a total of twelve recorded bat species, including the rare and fully protected naked bat. In the last few weeks, however, the park was pleased to add a thirteenth species to this list - the greater nectar bat discovered just a few weeks earlier. Surrounded by 529 sq km of rainforest, caves, rivers and gorges this new species was discovered in the park's cafeteria! Of the thirteen species, it is only the free-tailed bats that emerge in their thousands from deer cave at dusk and form an amazing wildlife spectacular.

After the tour of the caves I waited for the bats to emerge around dusk from 5pm onwards. At roughly 5.30pm the first bats emerged, forming a long stream, spiralling out towards the sky. It was only a few seconds until another few thousands bats did the same, all heading in the same direction to their feeding grounds, which range up to tens of kilometres away. Then there was another stream...and another...filling the sky with bats, until there was a constant stream swarming out from the cave's entrance. As more and more bats emerged, smaller groups would break off and fly off in different

directions. It was amazing; I can only liken the emergence to the way in which starling's swarm - streams of bats carving in and out of formation. The stream of emerging bats continued for around 40 minutes or so. There were so many bats that when they flew overhead, you could actually hear the sound of their wings.

Two keen bat hawks were flying around close to the cave entrance. I did not see them take any bats but they had such easy pickings and I knew they would not go hungry. I was also lucky enough to see a group of seven hornbills flying overhead, right over the swarm of bats. I was in Mulu for three nights and every night I went back to watch the bats and they never failed to disappoint.

The bats at Mulu are such a popular attraction that a bat observatory has been built where you can buy light refreshments and snacks, sit back and watch the bats emerge. It was slightly weird having this man-made observatory in the middle of what should have been unspoilt wilderness and I felt it was not necessary. However, when the bats emerged you soon forgot about this blot on the landscape and are fully absorbed by the natural marvel of the bats. You are only reminded of having company through the audience's impressed gasps of "oohhs" and "ahhhs" - and not a firework in sight!  
Michelle Henley

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*Bob and Jude know when they are out batted. We did manage to go to the Gomantong, but again we were out experienced - read on.*

## Chiroptivia

Adrian, one of Jude and Bob's guides pointed out a particularly vicious rattan on a forest walk and explained, almost apologetically, that in some areas, locals would string these from ropes across the entrance



to bats caves. These would then be collected and acted as an additional source of protein



Emergence

