

Vampires at the bottom of the garden

Photos Jude Hirstwood & Daniel Hargreaves

When people in Britain open their gardens to the public, care is taken to make it look as gorgeous as possible. When the occupants on Sangre Grande knew the Trinibats crew was coming to visit, they send two young men out to cut a track into the forest at the bottom of the garden with a pair of cutlasses. (Before you begin to conjure images of pirates swashbuckling, you need to know that cutlass is the Trinidadian word for machete).

Whereas much of the trip involved yomping, this was a fairly gentle stroll from the road, though the slope was steep in places and strewn with tree roots, one of which I, of course, tripped over,

Our destination was a beautiful silk cotton tree (also known as the Kapok tree). As we drove towards the village Geoffrey Gomes, our Trinidadian tour guide, pointed out a tree stranding head and shoulders above the other trees. Meeting it in the flesh was even more impressive. It had a huge trunk with elegant buttress roots. Soaring into the air But tree appreciation was not why we were there. For this tree hosted numerous bats. The trunk was hollow and you could stand inside it and the upper part was occupied by phyllostomid bats. We couldn't see these when we looked up into the tree because of the curvature of the trunk.

But we were there for the white lined vampires that lived in the lower portions. We knew there were many bats because the inside of the trunk held an impressive pile of bat guano.

We took it in turns to balance on the guano and peer up into the roost. We were rewarded by the sight of vampires flying around in within the trunk.



The intrepid Daniel Hargreaves decided to hand net one and the what followed was hilarious as the rest of us retreated to spectate.



White lined vampires you see are sneaky beast even by bat standards. Daniel carefully placed his hand net near a number of bats but each merely backed away. They would fly, then settle and wait while Daniel manoeuvred the net into place, all the time balancing precariously on the guano pile. Geoffrey helped him

to balance. The bats led him a fine dance for the next twenty minutes, It was like a tag wrestling contest with individual bats taking it in turn to taunt him and in the end Daniel says he only succeeded because one of the bats backed into another who gave him a gentle nudge so he fell into the net. Daniel triumphant made to extract his captive, who had one last trick up his wing and escaped and fluttered to rest low

on the inside of the trunk. Daniel instinctively grabbed it with his (ungloved) hand and emerged sweat covered but triumphant, only later reflecting this might not have been a sensible way to catch a vampire

Daniel explained the key features of his captured bat, trying to avoid the word "vampire" as some of the neighbours carrying an iguana caught while in the forest. had gathered,. The huge eyes, explained Daniel were to help it " er.. to see fruit"

There are more pictures of the trip in the photogallery on the website http://www.bedsbatgroup.org.uk/wordpress/?page_id=5127&wppa-album=14&wppa-cover=0&wppa-occur=1

You can see Daniel's film taken inside the tree by going to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hi8KGK0DUU0>. You can see the males defending their harems by flapping their wings