



## Hello Kitty

**Did Bob and Jude mention at any point that they were off to Thailand to look for bats with Daniel Hargreaves? Well possibly. And did they crow about what they found? Not as much as they might have. This was the trip of a lifetime. Read on and maybe feel a twinge of envy. As Jude Hirstwood tries to describe what it was like to meet the world's tiniest bat.**



Folk who know me know that I more likely to say "Isn't that amazing? "Rather than "What species is it?"

Long suffering birders will be used to me casting my eyes to the heavens when they say "I need that species".

But such folk will also know that I love trivia (see the website for pages of the stuff), and it was that aspect of *Craseonycteris thonglongyai* that attracted me rather than its rarity if truth be told. For this is the world's smallest bat and battles with the Etruscan shrew to win the smallest mammal in the world prize.

First discovered in 1973 by Thai biologist Kitty Thonglongya after whom they were named. The bat is about 29 to 33 mm (1.1 to 1.3 in) in length and 2g (0.071 oz) in weight, hence the common name of "bumblebee bat. It has two caudal vertebrae\_ but no visible tail. It also lacks calcars. Instead there is a large web of skin between the hind legs which may assist in flying and catching insects.

It has a brief activity period, only leaving its roost for only 30 minutes in the evening and 20 minutes at dawn.

It is one of the world's rarest bats, known only in two locations – a handful of caves in Myamar (né Burma) and in limestone caves along the River Kwai in Kanchanaburi Province.

So when Daniel Hargreaves offered us a chance to meet some of these creatures on the Thailand trip. I was a very happy bunny.

After a stop at the incredibly moving War Cemetery we headed towards the River Kwai

Braver souls than me walked to the cave site. You know me – wuzz to the backbone and walking over a railway bridge which was narrow, wooden and had gaps in through which you could see the water below and along which at any moment a train might appear failed to

appeal, so I availed myself of the offer to take the coward's option and ride in the minibus. At one side of this particular bridge was a track leading down into a small cave.





moment. These bats had obviously become adapted to throw their toys out of the pram at the slightest provocation -



As we got accustomed to the gloom we were met with a beautiful Buddha statue looking out at us impassively with a polished rock meditation platform in front of it.

In common with every other such cave we encountered, there was a serene feel to the place. and as I sat there I could feel a sense of peace seep into my bones. I was almost oblivious of the activity around me the guides scuttled off into the back of the cave with small nets like the ones children use. Some of the party crawled off down into another lower part of the cave while others headed up slippery steps into the upper regions to explore. Wuzz of the week stayed put taking in the atmosphere. (Oh boy was that a good move, Steve Parker came back down a bit later so excited that he had seen a cave snake – did I mention this wuzz does not like snakes either)



Then out of the darkness came three smiling guides, holding that small white net. It was like something out of a Tom and Jerry carton. The net jerked and spasmed violently as though Tom and Jerry were fighting to the death. You could see things jumping up and down like a baby having a tantrum because it wants to get out of its baby bouncer RIGHT NOW. (Though what you would be doing putting a baby bouncer in a keep net is beyond me) There is a common belief that some short men are aggressive and pushy. On that I will not comment but I will say this is true of Kittii's hog nosed bat. So small a bat to throw such a convincing hissy fit (Imagine your stroppiest soprano pip and at least double it, then cram that into a beast half the size) Here I was taking my first look at the smallest bat that I had travelled half way round to the world and all I could do was laugh. Kittii's indignation flared again, and despite being delicately handled whinged noisily throughout. It needed firm handling



So okay it must have been galling to be held while Daniel pointed out your very hoggy nose, and very long legs but you would think it would quieten down after a bit. (The picture on the cover was taken in a rare moment of quiescence and don't believe its sunny disposition) for a

and once released had so worn themselves out that we had to place them on a rock surface to get their breath before they could take off – perhaps this is why they forage for such a short period of time. They are exhausted by a day spent squabbling.



*A tired Kitti's pauses for breath on a rucksack before flying off to squabble some more*



Several other tourists strolled into the cave while we were there and it was lovely to be able to show them the bats, who of course continued to do their Diva routine. The peace of the cave disturbed yet again as the bats squabbled amongst themselves – even when they were on their own. Buddha looked on serenely.



We came away feeling nothing on earth could beat this experience. How wrong could we be?

This is a longer version of an article which appeared in the January 2011 edition of the Bats in Beds newsletter

All photos (c) Bob Cornes & Jude Hirstwood

This was just one of a number of amazing days we had on a trip organised by Bat Thai. [www.batthai.com](http://www.batthai.com)

## Chiroptivia



Limestone caves are common in Thailand and they are often shared by bats and Buddhist monks. These caves are regarded as sacred and this may be important in protecting the bats that live there

Monks may retreat there for a few days, months or in extreme cases even years.

How do you tell what day it is?" a monk was asked.

"I count the days by the bats. They make a great noise when they leave the cave to eat, which, like myself, is once a day."



This close human bat inter relationship has its downside as it is thought that some parasites have coevolved with them in order to take advantage of both species.



No guides could have worked harder than these guys to find the bats we wanted to see, and along the way they made sure we got a fascinating insight into Thai life. This experience is going to be heard to beat.

Thank also to Daniel Hargreaves (pictured centre) for inviting us along.