

The Quest for the Painted Bat

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I fell in love with the painted bat when I saw Daniel Hargreaves photo. It was hard to believe that this brightly coloured beast was a bat. It looked more like a creation from a Walt Disney animator who was on acid and had lost his ability to do twee. How could it have such brilliant orange fur – and those wing markings were amazing.

So when Daniel said we would see them on his Thailand trip, this was a major factor in my keenness to go.

We went to look for them at the end of our trip and I felt by then that we had had such a fantastic experience that it would be hard to top what we had already seen – but I was wrong.

We had a great day there, not just because we got to see the bat, but because we got to spend the day with a group of Thai farmers.

We drove into Ban Phai village early in the morning. There were a handful of houses. The minibus stopped at one and we were invited into the ground floor. The living quarters were up a flight of stairs and the ground law had a day bed for the matriarch of the family, a food preparation area, some inquisitive and very photogenic children and a couple of tractors.

Now when you say the word “tractor” what met us is not what would first leap to mind. They had handlebars like a Harley

Davidson and pulled an open truck behind them. Having been greeted with great friendliness, we piled into two of these vehicles and put-putted off along the road.



Shortly afterwards we stopped at another small building which was there they kept the silk worms that they bred for silk. In one corner of the shed, among the mulberry leaves, stood a gigantic hand loom on which they wove the silk they harvested. This silk was important to their economic survival as they were basically subsistence farmers.

Then it was back into the heat of the day and we chugged out to the banana tree in which the bats were to be found. The painted bat is a very rare beast and it took P’Qang, our local guide, a lot of searching to find. For years he carried a photo with him and showed it to any villagers he met, but until he reached this village he was never lucky.

As I mentioned in the last issue, the locals showed no great regard for the bat and if they caught one fed it to their fighting cocks to make them better fighters. P’Qang told them that if they kept the bats alive, then people would pay to come to the

village to see them. The villagers were initially sceptical but shortly afterwards a Japanese research team came to the village and stayed for several months studying and ringing the bats, bringing much needed money into the community.

It was obvious that the villagers had a close connection with the land, eking out a living in difficult circumstances. One of the young boys could do an excellent impression of a sugar cane rat and would lure them out of the vegetation and shoot them for the pot. Realising that the bats liked to roost under banana leaves which had been bent over, they would bend leaves over if there were none available in the area. The farmers helped us look for the bats and it was not long before the first one was found.

When it was brought for us to look at, a strange silence filled the party and we stared in what can only be described as awe at this creature. For a moment people were too transfixed to take photos. In the flesh they were even more impressive than in Daniel’s photos. This was because the males were in full breeding “plumage”. The orange was practically dayglo. I have put an album of photos onto the web site, so that you can see that I am not exaggerating.

Being given an opportunity to handle one was a real peak moment, and both Bob and I were photographed with a look of total joy on our faces.

We stopped for a delicious lunch

in the field and sat in a shelter raised above the ground and then we were off again. Waiting at the roadside a large orange butterfly fluttered past with a lolling flight. P'Qang pointed it out to me and I nodded and then realised this was no butterfly; this was the painted bat. It's almost limping flight was so like a swallowtail. P'Qang mimed that they flew like this during the day but at night they flew quickly.

Painted bats are unusual in that they form mating pairs. Most of the bats were found in pairs and if one of the pair was released before the other, they would wait and fly off together. Highspot was the moment when three bats were spotted, with the young nestled up against mum and dad.

As evening fell we went to another hut and another feast. We had provided the meat for a barbeque and all the villagers who had helped us joined us in devouring it.

Finally we went back to the village. We asked our guides if it would be possible to buy some of the silk that the villagers had produced and when we got back they had laid out an Aladdin's cave of silk. Raw silk is a yellow colour, but they bought dyes to produce a range of colours. The silk was heavy and some of the bolts had elaborate patterns woven into them. It was hard to choose and every one bought at least one piece. After a series of photos with them we went to leave and the elder of the group sort Bob out and shook his hand to thank us for buying the silk.

Why Bob? Because they rightly judge he was the oldest man present. The rest of the family waved to us and we bade a reluctant farewell.

As we travelled back to the hotel, Pongsanant told us that our purchase of silk would make a huge difference to them as they often had to sell the silk in its raw state as they could not afford dyes, and they could earn far more if they could dye and weave the silk themselves. They usually sold it to a middle man in Bangkok.

This is an excellent example of ecotourism at its best and we all felt humbled by the joy of these people who in material terms have very little – but actually had a great deal. It made us all very thoughtful

PS. Daniel Hargeaves tells me that P'Qang used his fee for being our guide to buy a bus to take the children to school.

This holiday was organised through Bat Thai. As you can guess I have no hesitation in recommending them, they could not have been more helpful and the glimpses we got of real Thai culture was a real bonus. See their website at:

<http://www.batthai.com/>



Pongsanant



P'Qang and a Kitti's Hog-nosed Bat