

Myotis and Maned Wolves

There are places in the world that just take your breath away and Caraca monastery is one. We had seen the article on maned wolves in BBC wildlife and thought we knew what to expect. Well we didn't. Jude Hirstwood tries to explain.

Caraca monastery is in the most stunning setting in the midst of a national park. We stayed in converted monks' quarters with lovingly restored wickerwork ceilings and surrendered instantly to its stillness.

Having spent the morning with the "vampires", and the afternoon on a long drive followed by a walk along a forest trail (that reduced the botanist in me to quiet ecstasy and the zoologist in me to real excitement when we got to watch a troupe of titi monkeys playing in the tree canopy. I wish that the zoologist in me had been a bit more considered in her response. Shrieking (albeit quietly) "Bob, I've got a pair of titis" gave every-one a good laugh) I am more than ready for a rest.

As dusk falls one of the monks brings out a large tray of meat on the bone and leaves it on the veranda at the top of the steps. We sit on patio chairs, cameras and eyes at the ready.

Barely has it got dark and there is the sound of claws padding up the steps. The maned wolf has arrived. He reminds me of something from a tops and tails game, his legs look way too long for his body – a fox on stilts – and he walks a little like a woman in a pair of stilettos which are a bit too high for her. And his paws make noise like high heels on concrete. He proceeds to perform a fixed action pattern dance. He comes to the tray to collect a piece of meat, holds it in his mouth watching us carefully, (but unconcerned about flash



photography), walks to the edge of the veranda and looks out into the grounds beyond. (Like a parent watching out for a later returning offspring I anthropomorphise) You can hear the bones crunching as he chews. (Think eating pork scratchings and multiply it by three). His eyes take in the audience but it is whatever may be in the shadows that has his real attention. Meat eaten, he returns and repeats this pattern for about twenty minutes, like a fabulous automaton, before descending the staircase into the night with the panache of a movie star. We go into the refectory to eat our dinner that has been cooked on a wood burning range and marvel at what we have seen.

Afterwards we go back downstairs to do the log, but are saved from this by a second visit from a maned wolf.

This second visit has an additional frisson as, in the midst of it, the monks begin their evening service and their beautiful plainsong fills the air (and tomorrow they will up the stakes and the wolves will eat surrounded by song and brilliant green luminescent fireflies). The word awesome is sadly overused but tonight is just that.

Tony finishes a perfect night by pointing his scope into the brilliantly clear star strewn sky and finding cloud nebulae for me to gawk at. Gentle reader, you may at this point be considering whether this has any

relevance whatsoever to the world of the bat but yes it does.

For, as we sit waiting for night to fall, Bob and I have our bat detectors on. There are two sorts of bat around and for once I am on a par with the rest of the batistas as no one has any idea what they are. But whatever there are, there are lots of them.

The next morning I wake early and as dawn rises go out to do some tai chi in the garden at the base of the chapel steps. I have barely begun trying to coax stiff limbs into action when I realise that the air is full of bats. They are flying swiftly in straight lines over the roof of the building to the left of the church. With the bats gone I turn to face the valley and watch dawn rise and the mist lift. The howler monkeys in the distant trees are hooting "good mornings" to each other. A very mellow bunny goes indoors to watch people cooking eggs on the range. Tony shows his culinary skills and makes an impressive omelette.

Another day in the field, more wonders glimpsed (she says trying to keep to the point) I get back first. Bob has the room key so I go and sit on the veranda. I hear a strange sound that reminds me for the entire world like a toy I had as a child a piece of card with holes in threaded onto a loop of string that made the most

Bob entranced by the maned wolf. © Derek Smith

amazing whirring noise when you moved the string. I cannot think what it can be – and then I realise. It's the sound of bat wings. There are bats setting off early to feed. I count about 16 in a two-minute period and see Bob and Tony strolling back towards me. I indicate that they need to be here right now but they seem to take an age to join me.

To begin with neither of them can hear the noise. Then Tony tunes in to it. It is very unbat like. He says "It's like swan's wings" and a little later modifies this to "It's like some-one shaking a blanket". It is some minutes before Bob identifies it- not that he is deaf, but rather he has been listening for a bat-like sound and this is not one of those.

By now they are swooping close around us. Bob and Tony yearn for a hand net. Tony removes his hat and holds it quizzically for they are so close they might well fly into a casually held hat.

It is decided to case the joint. I suggest getting up at 4.30. Derek and Tony suggest 4.45. When Bob and I do emerge at 4.45 Tony and Derek have done German impressions and are already out there and have bagged their places without towels. Derek is in a state of bliss, having got out first and been rewarded by the sight of a maned wolf coming up to clear the last of the meat from the dish

So we sit, drinking lemon tea, eating popcorn and recording bat social calls. We are all so excited and so tired that silliness comes to visit. We develop a new religion with the motto "We can always sleep on the bus" and at five in the morning we find this hilarious. But not as hilarious as Tony finding he can't get a photo of the sunrise. "There's always something in front of a sunrise" he says and at 5am that sounds really profound but also a real Eeyore moment.

When the bats have gone Tony and Derek go on a futile final hunt for guinea pigs and Bob and I grab some sleep.

Bob and I check out the chapel for signs of droppings but the place is so lovingly tended that there is not even any dust (I get a mental picture of



Photo © Bob Cornes

Anthea Turner and her white gloves). We are packed and ready to go when Regina comes to say that she has been asking the monks if they have a roost and they say yes and would we like to see it.

At this point I should perhaps confess to being the possessor of a number of fears (i) heights (ii) tightly spirally staircases and (iii) staircases you can see the ground through. So what on earth persuaded me that I would like to go to look for a roost? The monks said it was on the second floor – what was I thinking.? Partly I reasoned that all the hotels we had stayed in counted the ground floor as the first floor and also I reasoned sometimes fears need to be addressed. So I set off up the staircase. After two or three turns of the spiral we came to a mezzanine. I congratulated myself, even peering down into the void below without hyperventilating. The smug moment passes when I was pointed to a flight of rickety wooden stairs leading upwards.

Caution counsels staying put, but I carry on, grasping tight the wooden handrail, which wobbles alarmingly. Finally I make it. Oh how I would like to tell you what a great time I had. But I will not lie. As I come to the top of the step I see Regina leaning, practically velcroed, to the wall. I soon find out why. We are standing on a wobbly wooden platform, a platform that is a terminus. The floor

stops here. Ahead of us are a few beams lying across the top of the dome of the chapel. And it was at the far end of these that the bats hung high in the roof.



Phot o© Derek Smith The curving "floor" at the bottom of the picture is the arch of the roof shown left. Notice how narrow the beams are, and that yours truly is nowhere to be seen

At that moment my common sense caught up with me and we both made as dignified retreat as was possible with legs made of jelly.

While Bob remained on the wooden platform, Derek and Tony are made of stronger stuff they walk across like Mohawks on a skyscraper and have a good look round. Even Derek wasn't able to get fantastic photos as they were roosting so inaccessibly. You won't see a lot in black and white so I have posted them on the website.



If you look closely you may see a darker patch on the left hand side. Derek took this while balancing on one of those roof struts you can see in the photograph above.

Derek also managed to collect a mummified bat which was used to help us make an identification. I regained what cred I could by buying a tub of ice cream at a stopping point so that he would have somewhere he could store it without it being damaged. Derek also managed to collect a mummified bat that was

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Photo from www.batsofbci.org

What's the collective noun for people who study bats?

Regina was a Brazilian who was one of our tour guides. She was an expert naturalist, but had not met a group of bat enthusiasts before. Her English was excellent but she was stumped as to what you called bat fanatics. She knew birdwatchers were ornithologists and reduced Richard Webb, the other tour leader, to hysterics by asking him whether we were "battyologists". I think some of the birders thought she was close – and that batty would be just perfect. One of the other members of the party explained absolutely straight faced that the word she was looking for was "batistas".

A photo of the desiccated bat after we had watered it (not). Photo© Derek Smith

After much dissection (both physical and intellectual) and even more measuring it is decided that we have seen *Myotis nigricans*, which ties in with our initial thoughts that one of the echolocation calls we heard was quite *Myotis* like.

Was this amazing couple of days the end of our battery? –No, but you'll have to wait until the next issue to find out more - or come to the January meeting to see these and other pictures in colour. (I'll try to get some onto the website over Christmas)

Myotis nigricans are obviously hard to photograph, but eventually I did find this one on a site. It is well worth visiting.





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Chiroptivia

An item especially for the cyclists amongst you:



In August 1926 Horace Bates founded Bates Cycles at 2a Swete Street, London E13. His brother E.G. Bates joined the company in 1927 and the firm changed its name to "Bates Brothers" shortly afterwards. They manufactured all types of cycle frames and cycles, sports, touring, club and racing machines and chose this lovely bat as their logo. I'm not clear why they chose a bat as their logo. Perhaps the Lycra clad amongst you can help me here

There's a link to more information on this on the website.

101 Uses for a dead bat



No 49

Stop children eating dirt

In North Carolina they used to stop children eating dirt as follows. -Take a bat, roast it on a skewer. Pull the skin off. Make the child eat dirt, then eat the bat and they'll never eat dirt again. (But will they get the taste for bats?)

