

An evening out watching telly

This photo is a screen shot from the infrared video that Jonathan Durward shot at the roost. You will need to look closely but you can just make out two very beady eyes.

Vampyrum spectrum is the largest bat species in the Americas and a predator. It hunts birds, reptiles and small mammals, including smaller species of bat. *Vampyrum* lives in small family groups and the bats spend much of their time in a tree roots in dense forest, occasionally making forays to bring back a tasty lizard or rat. One of the highlights of this year's Trinibats trip was an opportunity to spend an evening or night watching at one of two known roosts at a secret location in Trinidad in order to record the behaviour of this very impressive and fascinating bat.

My evening shift at the roost began just before 6 pm. With two other watchers I set off into dense forest, carrying the gear we would need – stools, an infrared video camera, tripod, bat detector and a hammock (a brief rest was allowed for one of us at a time). As we approached the area of the roost tree we were trying to be absolutely silent because the bats have exceptionally acute hearing. Their ears are trumpet-shaped, constantly turning and scanning, and are used to locate prey. The slightest sound from us could cause them to remain out of sight all night. One of our number felt the need to walk about rather noisily while rummaging in his bag, and he had to be restrained from making comments on possible sitting positions in a stage whisper which would have woken a post that doesn't hear as well as it used to, had just

received a massive overdose of chloroform and thought it deserved a proper lie-in.

After a few minutes, all was quiet and we settled into as much comfort as could be achieved while sitting on a very small folding stool on uneven ground. The roost, although some 20 metres away, was clearly visible, and I was eagerly anticipating the excitement of watching the New World's largest bat swoop out of the tree and flap noisily off to find a tasty rat. The infrared video was focused on the roost and set to record all the spectacular activity that we felt our efforts deserved. What could possibly go wrong?

The tropical twilight didn't last long and we soon found that, far from having a good view of the roost opening, we couldn't see anything at all. Torches, of course, were strictly forbidden except for a red head torch for brief periods. The only option was to peer at the tiny screen of the video camera which, thanks to the infrared lamp, showed a greenish monochrome image that made the surrounding darkness seem even more impenetrable. Mr. Noisy (who had been suffering from a malady of the bowel for several days) walked off as quietly as he could to select a spot for an improvised latrine. He did well and was really rather unobtrusive until he tried to find his way back to us in the dark. Despairingly, we watched the red dot of his head torch moving further and further away. A rescue mission was swiftly and silently carried out, he



returned and all seemed well. Then my folding stool creaked slightly and gave a lurch. With considerable muscular effort, I managed not to fall to the ground. I improvised a repair in total silence in the light of a red head-torch. Within ten minutes the stool had permanently collapsed and I was left to stand. This gave me a slightly better view of the miniature camera screen, but soon necessitated regular twisting and flexing of my legs to stave off cramp. Then the camera started to give trouble. It had somehow been set to a mode which saved a backup copy of the video file on the second memory card, using up the available memory far too quickly. Some hasty deletion of backup files and resetting of options seemed to solve the problem until the battery ran low. Silent changing of memory cards and batteries (involving very slow rummaging in the bag) was miraculously accomplished, but by now we were convinced that the bats had discovered us, laughed themselves silly, escaped through a hitherto undiscovered back entrance to the roost and emigrated to Venezuela.

Yet somehow they hadn't. We began to hear quiet sounds from the direction of the roost. Squinting at the screen, we could

detect movement and the occasional glimpse of glowing eyes within the tree hole. Sometimes it was two eyes, but at other times there was just one. One of the bats had only one eye, perhaps the result of selecting an excessively vicious item of prey sometime in the past. After an enthralling period of watching and listening to this and noting the grooming behaviour, we were treated to the sight of a bat leaping from the roost, opening its wings to display its one metre wingspan and vanishing into the dark forest. The idea that we could hear the beating of the wings was wrong; the bat was absolutely silent when it flew. A few minutes later it returned,

equally unobtrusively, with something dangling from its jaws. The excitement continued all evening. For much of the time we could see at least one animal in the roost, either grooming or chewing a prey item. Every now and then a bat would emerge and disappear into the forest for a few minutes. Usually it returned with something hanging from its mouth. Imagining the experience of a rat on the forest floor was not a comfortable thought. All quiet and peaceful, with morsels of food now and then, until suddenly a gaping mouth full of dagger-like teeth flashes without warning out of the dark and closes on your head. *Vampyrum spectrum*, the Spectral Bat, didn't seem such a

fanciful name after watching its antics in the impenetrable blackness of the nocturnal forest. What we could see was very limited; and yet somehow the tiny greenish screen, with the atmosphere of the forest all around, made the experience more vivid than any wildlife documentary. Tired as I was, I almost resented the group of red torches which appeared at midnight to take over from us. Watching the video later on a computer screen, I could see extra details such as the rat's tail dangling from the bat's jaw, but it couldn't compare with the feeling of being there.

Bob Cornes

The mysterious case of the banana thieves in the night

Photos of *Carollia* and bananas Jude Hirstwood

While the *Vampyrum* were monitored and filmed by brave souls who spent all night watching the roost while the rest of us trapped in the forest or went back to the Hacienda and several of the party joined Daniel H in photographing the bats which fed on the bananas which the owners left in our room.

The people on the previous week's trip had lured passing *Carollia perspiculata* indoors with the promise of bananas and so when we got up the next day we found that they had chewed EXTREMELY neat holes in

the bananas skins and feasted on our fruit bowl. (See exhibit A) The women who looked after the chalets could not believe how many bananas we got through as a group. Little did they know.

We had little difficulty in identifying the culprits (see exhibit B).

