

BAT CLEFT UPDATE

- Dianne Vavryn

Tour numbers down due to Lyssavirus Scare

The number of visitors going to Bat Cleft (near Rockhampton, Qld) this season were way down in December due to the Lyssavirus scare. I was told by many who participated in the tour that a lot of their friends and relatives could not be persuaded to go for fear of contracting the virus. A local Bush Walking Club too had members that declined to go this year for the same reason. The local paper, The Morning Bulletin, was not very helpful when they ran two Bat Cleft news articles and right beside them Lyssavirus warning articles. This was followed by the news that the virus was also found in an insectivorous bat. To make matters worse on the same page as a Lyssavirus warning the headlines read **"Rare bat cave guano fungus disables five."** The five had contracted Histoplasmosis from guano they were digging up in a cave near Many Peaks. The guano they had removed from the cave was later incinerated. Even letters to the editor were accentuated with large bold black headlines, **"Resident: Wipe out the flying fox vermin."** one read. Years of work educating the public of the importance of both mega and micro bats to the environment, can be undone overnight by sensationalized media reporting. In one case the reporting was grossly incorrect and incomplete causing unnecessary fear in the public and giving some people another excuse to kill bats illegally.

Even months later I am still hearing the aftermath of that report, where people wont walk under their mango trees any more in case a bat flies out and attacks them. We no doubt will be hearing more regarding Lyssavirus as more animals are tested. I dread to think what will happen if the virus is also found in Little Bent-wing Bats and in particular those using Bat Cleft and other caves visited by the public. With Bat Cleft being such a vulnerable site, the possibilities of what could be done there, through unwarranted fear, are frightening. The number of animals that are legally sacrificed for testing to be carried out is also of concern to me. Many bat carers have tightened security of their cages for the protection of the public and their bats in care. They dont want anyone to get bitten or their bats put down.

Numbers improve

On a more pleasant note, by early January tours had picked up and extra tours were run to cater for the demand. Also one trip was organized to see the re-entry of the bats returning to the cave before dawn. The radio interview I did on the ABC just prior to Christmas, about the tours, I am told was successful. Don Cook, Central Regions District Manager of the Department of Environment, informed me that the phones started ringing straight away. He said "It was the best interview he has heard, ... done with such passion and very good advertising for the Department." I thought it was rather mediocre and on the way home was thinking what a mess I made of it, and the many things I should have said and didn't. The interviewer very obligingly

didn't make any mention of the Lyssavirus and Histoplasmosis issues, and is keen to do another interview next season.

The Re-Entry Tour

Like the emergence flight there is a mass re-entry of bats to Bat Cleft just before dawn. They return a lot faster than they emerge. It is as equally spectacular to see, but quite different, than the emergence. Emerging, the bats fly out in roughly the same direction. When returning they come from all directions from below and above the mountain and at much greater speeds. They fly directly into the entrance shaft, jamming on the brakes once they are in the shaft, then gliding down the thirty metres like falling leaves, where they disappear from sight into the cave below. It never ceases to amaze me how they can just zoom straight into the small entrance at such speeds, with no hesitation and no need to circle around first to locate the entrance shaft. It usually takes about twenty minutes and they are all safely back home. The bats are in such a hurry to get back into the cave before light that one ran into a prickly pear bush and staked itself on a thorn. I have also heard of them pouring over the railway line very low and on account of them a train having to stop. The railway line runs at the base of Mount Etna and on the opposite side to Bat cleft.

The snakes and frogs that feed on the bats are mostly gone or are heading home when the tour arrives at Bat Cleft at 4.00 am and they are seldom still hunting. The re-entry tour is only by special arrangement and it is preferred that visitors have previously done the emergence trip. The re-entry tour meets at the The Caves township at 3.30 am and are normally back by 5.30 am. The vegetation which is silhouetted in black in front of the big red ball of the rising sun above the opposite hill, the pink glow of the sky around us and the sweetly scented cool morning air, all add to the ambience of the whole experience of witnessing the bats returning to their roost.

Strange Occurrences

After many years of drought it was good to see the green tree frogs back at Bat Cleft in numbers and hunting bats. A favorite hunting position of some frogs is sitting on the back of spotted pythons as each hunts bats. Once again visitors were able to witness a frog attempting to grab the back of the snake it was sitting on, as the python moved beside it. These snakes, *Liasis childreni*, are fully grown and would be about a metre in length and the frogs, *Litoria caerulea*, are the average sized green tree frogs. I have never seen a snake at Bat Cleft retaliate. It seems the frog is merely striking out towards the movement and can make some grave errors, particularly when they try to grab a large centipede. Centipedes do retaliate and the frog sometimes ends up second best.

A few weeks ago, while on tour, I found a large very well fed five legged Cane Toad, *Bufo marinus*, on the Bat Cleft track. I thought this would be of great interest to science. A man on the tour

kindly carried it down the mountain and parceled it up for me and later it was taken to the University. The person at the University the toad was given to explained that five legged frogs were not unusual and explained several ways in which this can occur. I did not know previously that tadpoles can grow a new limb and sometimes two if one is injured or severed.

With the juvenile bats now well into flight, the season will soon be finished and I will have to wait another nine months before I get the joy of seeing my baby again and proudly showing it to others. Lets just hope that no viruses are found in Bent-wing Bats that man feels could be a threat to his health and that many more people have the opportunity to experience this unique wildlife phenomena.

Bat Researchers to visit Rockhampton

In late February, this year, seventeen American bat researchers are expected in Rockhampton. The final details are not yet known.. It is believed they wish to visit Bat Cleft and it is hoped John Toop will mist net a Ghost Bat at Johannsen's Cave to show them. This was done for the International Bat Pre-conference Study Tour in 1989 and again for the ACKMA Conference in 1993. Those who attended these field Trips arrived at Johansen's by bus where they all alighted and surrounded John who had already caught the bat. John explained much about the conservation of these animals and the many things he had learnt through his research. The bat seemed to be completely at ease in Johns hand as it was photographed by many and later released. It was certainly a rare and privileged opportunity for the international bat researchers to see a Ghost Bat, due to them being vulnerable and found only in Australia.