

Batting in Swaziland

By Erna van Schalkwyk

In full expectation of an African adventure, our border crossing into Swaziland was rather uneventful. R50 road tax gets you into Swaziland and the most amazing thing on the other side is a built-up, well lit highway designed for smooth riding. You feel like you are in an advertisement for the newest fast car, but then soon realize that it is in actual fact a work-in-progress when you suddenly end up amongst the conventional African transport on a half-dirt half-tar road with a few goats on the side.

Late night bumper-to-bumper traffic slowed our pace, but being from Joburg, we knew how to relax in rush hour traffic. The stress only set in when we got lost (almost) and were refused access to a game park through which we believed to be the only road to Mlawula Nature Reserve, our final destination. After rustling sounds from the bushes, we were quick to resume the travelling and after a lot of arguing, we actually took the correct turn-off and arrived at Mlawula at the same late night hour as Woody Cotterill & co from Cape Town. The reason for all this travelling was to attend the workshop at Mlawula Nature reserve in Swaziland on: “**The Use of Echolocation in the Conservation and Taxonomy of Southern and Eastern African Bats**” which was hosted by the Bat interest Group of KwaZulu Natal, University of Swaziland and All Out Africa. The FRI kindly provided funding for the attendance of two overseas delegates: Paul Bates from the Harrison institute and Dorothea Pio (University of Lausanne, Switzerland) as well as two key-note speakers: Bernard Agwanda from Kenya and Robert Kityo from Uganda.



Workshop attendees posing in front of the MES

Back row, from l to r: Robert Kityo (Makerere University, Uganda), Juan Wood (Bats KZN), Jacqui Bishop (UCT), Dr. Ara Monadjem (University of Swaziland), Wendy White (Bats KZN), Paul Bates (Harrison Institute, UK), Dr. Peter Taylor (Bats KZN & Durban Natural Science Museum), Erna van Schalkwyk (GNoR BIG), Bernard Agwanda (National Museums of Kenya)

Front: Woody Cotterill (UCT, Zimbabwean/Zambian representative), Kate Richardson (Bats KZN), Julio Balona (GNoR BIG), Dorothea Pio (University of Lausanne, Switzerland), Leigh Richards (University of KwaZulu Natal). Not on the picture is Nico Avenant and Wanda Kaiser from National Museum Bloemfontein

Other speakers also included the well known Dr. Peter Taylor, and Dr. Ara Monadjem (University of Swaziland) and Dr Woody Cotterill. Dr Nico Avenant and Wanda Kaiser from National Museum Bloemfontein, also attended the workshop and told interesting facts about the “Rooikat” and biodiversity.

One of Ara’s presentations, which made quite an impression on me, was on a bat survey done in Liberia – a country left run down by war, with no electricity or infrastructure. The only transport available is with UN



Kate is busy hydrating the Banana bat before release, while Ara is recording hand-calls.

vehicles. He found interesting species of trident bat and a variety of fruit-bats, which are also a local delicacy.

The workshop started with an optional bird-watching expedition in the early hours of the morning, which according to my body clock, does not actually exist. I was told that the bird walks were well attended and enjoyed, except the one time they accidentally left Peter Taylor behind.

After a day of talks, discussions and presentations, we retreated to an evening of bat-catching. Our inventory included one Banana bat and a few Sundevall's leave-nosed bats (*Hipposideros caffer*). The Banana bat, *Neoromicia nanus* was released in front of paparazzi, each ready to record the call of the celebrity.

Calls were then downloaded and compared, equipment was admired and discussed! Most of Australia's and Europe's bat call recordings have been recorded with Anabat technology, but due to discrepancies in a certain frequency range, large amount of criticism has been passed on those who use it for more than identification. What I learnt was that GNoR BIG has one of the best brands (Tranquillity) and like most Gautengers, we showed up with the least amount of knowledge (speaking for myself only) and the biggest, most expensive equipment! (Luckily we left with a lot of knowledge.)



Peter Taylor, Julio Balona, Kate Richardson, Wendy White, Nico Avenant and Ara Mondajem all ready to record the call of the Banana bat.

I learnt that if you want to be in the bat world, you have to learn those Latin names and making up your own versions like '*Cacophonous verstibali*' are frowned upon.

On a more serious note, I learnt to distinguish between good and bad quality calls (a call where the sound was too loud is called a clipped call and does not give a true representation of the actual call). One also has to ensure that the bat is actually flying and making a navigation call, which can then be used for identification. Even though a bat in the hand is worth two in the bush, a call from hand cannot necessary be used for identification.

I learnt that there are bats with constant frequency calls (like the Geoffroy's horseshoe bat, *Rhinolophus clivosus*) and those with variable frequency, (like the African Yellow Bat, *Scotophilus dinganii*) and those who speak so soft that it is difficult to record if you are further than a meter away. The reason why those whispering bats have really big ears is so that they can hear themselves! Julio was also lucky enough to record a call of the whispering bat – the Egyptian slit-faced bat (*Nycteris thebaica*), which were roosting in the thatch of a nearby lapa. Julio has by now collected many different bat calls and has quite a few entries in the GNoR BIG bat call library.

One of the aims of the workshop was to establish a way forward for a Southern and Eastern African Bat Call Library Meta-database. Bats KZN indicated that they would like to manage the bat call library and one of the options might be to submit calls online. One of the concerns was how to confirm that the call received is indeed that of the named bat. These discussions appeared to be: 'to be continued'.

Paul Bates from the Harrison institute has compiled a book on bats of South-East Asia (wow!). He is now looking to establish a learning centre for taxonomy somewhere in Africa (double wow!), after doing so in South-East Asia. The debate was on! Which country was to benefit from the Darwin Initiative Funding for Africa? Kenya, Uganda, Swaziland, Mozambique and South Africa were discussed and every diplomat of the respective countries tried the shoe on like Cinderella's sisters. Uganda seemed to have the matching shoe size, as some of the countries have already established research institutes and others again, have too little infrastructure. In the end, bats will benefit as they would be the objects of desire (study) and that is really what matters.

Dorothea Pio was another interesting character; while leaving her photo journalist boyfriend at home, she travels to Africa, but only after discovering a new bat (strikingly similar to the beautiful Welwitsch's hairy bat) in South-East Asia. She assembles mist nets, carries the harp trap and you name it, she can do it! "Respect!" as Ali G would have said.

At the end of the workshop we were let in on a little secret. What all the bat-watchers can look forward to is a new bat atlas and identification key in a brand new book which is being compiled by the trio of Woody Cotterill, Ara Monadjem and Peter Taylor. I cannot wait!

What I enjoyed the most besides the batty things? The outside shower, powered with paraffin, with a view over the valley, and Woody Cotterill's comment that the TV is an idiot-lantern.

I wish to thank BATS KZN for the arrangement of the workshop and for extending the invitation to GNoR BIG.



Julio and Peter sharing bat stories over a beer at sunset

