

**Chairman's Report for the  
GNoR BIG 2005/2006 Annual  
General Meeting**

**held on  
8<sup>th</sup> July 2006  
at the Winchester Marketing Offices,  
Houghton, Johannesburg.**



I would like to commence by welcoming all those present today to this Annual General Meeting of the Gauteng and Northern Regions Bat Interest Group.

**And I would like to thank Winchester Marketing for again kindly allowing us to use their premises for this AGM.**

AGMs are important occasions for any body or grouping as they are the foundation day for the upcoming year where personnel, usually volunteers in this type organisation, offer their services and commitment to work for their society for the forthcoming year.

Over the last few years, while I have been Chairman, we have seen ups and downs within the Bat Interest Group, and most of the downs have come about where there has been a weak link of commitment within the Committee. And it must be said that every time there has been a weak link within the Committee, the Bat Interest Group and the purposes of the Bat Interest Group have suffered.



Fruit bats in Zambia

Board Ecologist. Dean was our leading scientist, our Bat Detector expert and our main link to the Gauteng Provincial Government Department of Agriculture Conservation and the Environment (DACE). This link was very important as it helped us with information on some of the points where there are threats to regional Conservation, and helped us with many points of contact and the understanding of legislation.

But overall I must thank the Committee for their enduring efforts to continue the worthwhile purposes of the GNoR BIG to be a firm standpoint for the Conservation of Bats. But as is usual, in this past year we also suffered some downs. And the worst of the downs, unavoidable as they were, were the departure of some of our dedicated Committee Members from Gauteng to other parts of South Africa for their career purposes.

Dr Dean Peinke, our Vice Chairman for the past five or so years, and his delightful wife, Sacha, who was our Secretary for about two years, left Gauteng at the end of April for East London, where Dean is now the Eastern Cape Parks

**On behalf of the Committee and the Membership I express our grateful thanks to Dean and Sacha** for all the honest and dedicated work they contributed to GNoR BIG. We wish them well in their future and will greatly miss their genuine companionship.

**We also wish Leigh Potter, who was for most of one year our Membership Secretary, all the best in her new employment** and future in the Western Cape to where she has moved closer to her home. Leigh was an enthusiastic Member of the Committee and did a sterling job trying to recover our Membership system after it had sadly become almost dormant for the previous two to three years.

Being an optimist, I always see the better side of things, but I feel confident that I am right to see, that with the partly new Committee that we are about to have, that this year will deliver for us one of the smoothest years of all. I say this, as we needed to co-opt new Committee Members during the year to keep us on the wing when some Members had to depart. And I sincerely believe that those Members, who continue to offer their services for the coming year, will be successful for GNoR BIG and help to steer for Group beyond this year as well.



Straw-coloured fruit bat (Zamibia)

The activities of the Group this year have again been very energetic for a Group that is really very small. Our main public window has probably been our Bat Walks at the Walter Sisulu Botanical Gardens in Roodepoort, Johannesburg, and the Pretoria National Botanical Gardens. During the past twelve months we held eight such Bat Walks, and despite some interruptions or unplanned interventions such as a thunderstorm and some over booking, our Bat Worker Volunteers, who conduct these events, absolutely excelled and seemed to enjoy every minute of the occasions with some good team building within the GNoR BIG.

These Bat Walks require at least seven volunteers for each occasion, and through the enthusiasm of our members we were mostly, if not always, oversubscribed. I must state that these Bat Walks are so popular that we reluctantly have to turn potential guests away, and the feedback from the public, who attended, is always very praising for what they have learnt, and for the way the events were organised.

So this prompts me to say a big thank you to our volunteer Bat Workers for their continued efforts at the Bat Walks, and another big thank you to the Curators of the respective Botanical Gardens, Sharon Turner and Karen Behr, and the good ladies, Sheila Head, at Roodepoort and Linette Ferreira at Pretoria, with whom I make the arrangements, for all their respective assistance and enthusiasm.

I was greatly helped by Yvonne Cory Troussaint, who handled all the bookings for the Walter Sisulu Bat Walks, and for all that voluntary work that you did for us, I thank you, Yvonne, very much indeed.



Straw-coloured fruit bat

Other activities included our **'in house' Bat Training Courses** for our Members, and I get a sneaking feeling that we have not been doing enough of these. But also, for the first time, we conducted an 'in house' Bat Detector Course. This Course came about because we were suddenly thrown into panic mode when we realised that our most experienced Bat Detector Operator, Dr Dean Peinke, was imminent to leave us. So it was of prime importance to ask Dean to share his skills and knowledge with those interested to operate our sophisticated Tranquillity Bat Detector. Fortunately several of our Members were very keen, so,

while I am sure we all still need some essential and broad based field experience, we certainly have a good nucleus of Members to operate this very technical bit of equipment, not to mention the broader general understanding amongst more members about echolocation and hand held Bat Detectors.

In the past year we continued to have our weekend field outings for Members, with an excellent outing to Komatipoort and Malelane at the end of August 2005.

In early December a group of six Members visited the **Kasanka National Park in northern Zambia** to view the amazing phenomenon of the migration of up to an estimated amount of 8 million Straw Coloured Fruit Bats. These Bats occupy a small area, in hectare terms, of swamp forest to roost by day for about two months, while they feed at night over an extensive region on tropical bush fruits. We were lucky to have the American researcher, Heidi Richter, present and she kindly included us in as much Bat Work as was possible. I can recommend to all our Members, and anyone keen on wildlife, that a visit to Kasanka to see this amazing event is well worthwhile. And Zambia is a splendid place to visit.



Fruit bats fly out at dusk (Zambia)

It seems that we only had two **Bat Talks** in the past year. These were by the visiting Australian BCI members, Terry and Trish Wimberley, who were here for a BCI trip to Madagascar. Terry and Trish spoke mainly about their most interesting BCI trip of the previous year to the Amazon, and their dedicated Bat rehab work in Queensland, Australia, south of Brisbane, on the Gold Coast, where they live.

In October we were able, at last, to welcome one of Southern Africa's leading mammalogists, and a prominent Bat Scientist, Dr Peter Taylor, to share with us some of his extensive knowledge on Bats and many aspects such as their habits, their conservation and some of the findings that he has accomplished.

And during the last year, two of our Members, who wore 'two Bat hats', one each as a Member of GNoR BIG, and one each as an Officer of DACE, and I am talking about Dean Peinke and Gareth Eloff, both continued with their Department programme to check many of the caves of Gauteng with the expert guidance of Mike Buchanan of CROSA and also a GNoR BIG Member, to assess the state of roosts and conservation versus the disturbance balance within the caves.



Amazing colours of Welwitsch's hairy bat

Mike Buchanan has regrettably now moved with his family to the UK, and he will be greatly missed by GNoR BIG and his friends, and I wish Mike and Gail and family great success where they now live.

During the year we continued to attend the six day **Sasol TechnoEx at Sasolburg** with the University of Pretoria's Science Discovery Centre (now Sci Enza), where we have the opportunity of communicating with numerous school children at this 'mass education fair', which is attended by approximately fifty thousand school children.

And we also participated, again with **Sci Enza**, in a similar education fair, put in place by the Tshwane University of Technology, held annually in March at the Tshwane Events Centre. This event is much newer and is still growing, but it is another useful opportunity to communicate with the youth of South Africa.

It is worth mentioning at this stage, that the majority of school children have no idea of what Bats are, and, typically, are guided by various myths and beliefs in their understanding. It is most rewarding to work with the whole cross-section of these children, and their faces light up with delight as they realise that they are learning something totally contrary to their long held beliefs, while they literally stare a live hand-held Bat in the face.

I must thank Mrs Rudi Horak of the **University of Pretoria Science Discovery Centre/Sci Enza** for graciously allowing GNoR BIG to join in with their displays at the two educational Science Fairs just mentioned, and also for kindly permitting us to host Bat Talks at the auditorium at the University. On the several occasions that we have held talks there, Rudi is denied necessary time off and to be with her family.



The wing of a straw-coloured fruit bat

We also participated at the University of the Witwatersrand's **'Ama Bloema - Ama Gogo'** Science Show last October. This dedicated show at Wits is very well organised and directed to attracting students to the University. We have found this event very worthwhile attending, as the visitors attending are well orientated towards Natural History topics. Unfortunately last year we had to leave two days early as the event clashed with our Bat Walk season at Pretoria. But I thank Yvonne and Dawn Cory Troussaint for kindly assisting us at this event.

During the year we continued our close contact with **FreeMe**. Over the past few years FreeMe have been an important link for us as we borrow the live Bats from them for our educational work at Science Shows. Also their Director, Margie Brocklehurst, participates at most of our Training Days to lecture on the rehab side of Bats. So many thanks to Margie and FreeMe.

We carry a permit from DACE for the display of the FreeMe Bats at the functions that we attend, including several dedicated Bat Talks that I do around the country. Regarding these Talks, I inform the membership, lest there should be a misunderstanding, that I wear 'two hats' with the Bat scene. Apart from doing as much voluntary work as possible for GNoR BIG, I, personally, design, make and sell Bat Houses and do Bat Talks and some commercial advisory work for which I get paid. I like Members to know that this is above board, and I do not use my position as Chairman for so called insider trading.

An employee of mine, Johannes Tshabalala, has become an increasingly noticeable member of our Training Days and Bat Walks etc. Johannes is very capable of erecting our flight tunnel and with many other tasks, and I thank Johannes for helping us in the field with putting together our equipment at those very busy moments.

GNoR BIG has continued with its excellent Web Site, which was so capably put together for us by Mimi Neumann. We know that this web site is very popular and serves to assist masses of people to learn important information about Bats.

It also receives many visits from around the world – I am sure this is good for South Africa. We will continue to maintain this Web Site – [www.batsgauteng.org.za](http://www.batsgauteng.org.za) .

Your committee saw fit during the year to purchase a laptop computer, which is necessary for the operation of the scientifically directed Bat Detector. Up to then Dean Peinke had been using his own computer for this purpose and that was not a satisfactory arrangement, but we were grateful to Dean for his efforts. And fortunately our Secretary, Gertrude Ebner, has now grasped the laptop for taking the minutes at our Committee meetings.

While mentioning purchases, I must inform you that your Committee is now embarking on the purchase of a **Harp Trap, to be imported from Australia**. This bit of equipment should significantly improve our efficiency in the field to assess species of Bats around and about and boost our scientific capabilities. Hopefully the Harp Trap will be with us within this month.

The above purchases become possible through the sale of our merchandise – Bat T shirts, caps and the Bat Book etc – and through attendance at the Bat Walks that we do, and through the annual Membership subscriptions. So I urge all Members to please renew your subscriptions to GNoR BIG as early as possible, or else I will ask Erna van Schalkwyk, our Membership Secretary, to irritate you with forms with appeals for renewal!

I have mentioned **my optimism** earlier about the year ahead. We have a number of events posted for our Members to participate in. And I am sure that with fertile ideas coming from the Membership or from within the Committee, that we can look at additional ideas. Members are always encouraged to become involved, and volunteers are always welcome to assist with our educational and conservation efforts. So please don't be shy to commit yourselves to some of our worthwhile endeavours.

We have several research type projects that we could become involved in. I think we need to strengthen our research-based initiatives, perhaps with a separate sub committee, so that we can involve some of our Members with projects that will interest them and produce useful information. And we would also look for additional ideas in this regard. I am sure it is up to us to attract more interest by what we offer.



A resting Epauletted type fruit bat

It is important for all concerned with an organisation such as our GNoR BIG, which is a recognised NGO, that while we have serious objectives involving public education on Bats, conservation and research, that it should, in parallel, be regarded as a recreational and social group for the enjoyment of Members in what they do and in what they have volunteered for. We encourage young Members to join us so as to avoid this world of so many woes, where many young can become waylaid into drugs, alcohol or other threatening habits in this fast moving way of life.

**I conclude by thanking my dear wife, Rose, for supporting my voluntary commitment to GNoR BIG with a lot of voluntary work herself.** Rose cares for all our merchandise, maintains the stock lists, and is almost always seen busy behind the table with registration and Bat T shirt etc sales at our functions and attends, with me, all the educational events that we become involved in. And she usually is on the serving side of the tea and coffee that is served at many of these events. So, many thanks, Rose.

Many thanks to you all.  
Nigel Fernsby.  
8<sup>th</sup> July 2006.