

## DIARY FEBRUARY / MARCH 2005

It has been a slightly crazy period for me, dashing from one side of the planet to the other in a matter of days. I returned from Kenya and Toki the Cheetah to the UK, and left again after 2 days mad organisation to Borneo where I now sit. I am in a lodge on the banks of the Kinabatangan River in Sabah, NE Borneo. It is very warm, very humid. The shrill sound of cicadas fills the air, making the heat feel all the more intense.



I am here to film a remarkable phenomenon. Each evening, just before sunset, 2 million bats emerge from the Gomantong cave system to feed over the forest below. Their exodus stirs the hunters, birds of prey that have learnt to make the most of this rush hour. We have seen several species, some of which, like the rufous-bellied eagle, are not well adapted to taking bats on the wing. They almost literally stumble into the flocks, legs and wings going every which way, and, if lucky, manage to snag a bat in the process. Other, more acrobatic hunters are here too. Several peregrine falcons gather at dusk to snatch a meal, often taking 4 or 5 bats in a matter of minutes. But even these masters of the air look clumsy when compared to the specialists. Bat Hawks are aptly named. Their apparently leisurely flight on dark pointed wings is deceptive. From a gentle climb, they glide towards the flocks of bats, and then with lightning speed, flick out a long leg to snatch one of the little mammals from the group. They then appear to fold the wings of the bat into a neat parcel with both feet, before delivering it to the beak and swallowing it down. All this without missing a wing beat. I have watched Bat Hawks before in East Africa, and always marvelled at their flying skills. But never before have I had such a wonderful birds-eye view of their hunting behaviour. My vantage point is a narrow cliff, high above the forest.



...a magical wildlife spectacle...



Quite a climb each day with the camera gear in the heat, resulting in saturated shirts and a deep thirst. The wait for the main event is often punctuated by more wildlife spectacle. A nearby fig tree has been visited each day by Orang Utans. They seem to have a rota system going, so that never more than one adult is in the tree at any one time. One day it may be a female with a tiny baby, the next an adult male and so on. These are the first wild Orangs I've seen, and they are wonderful company as I wait for the bats to emerge. My view over the forest is often graced by Rhinoceros

Hornbills drifting from tree to tree, or a troupe of Red Leaf Monkeys on the cliffs nearby. In short, it is a magical wildlife spectacle. All this continues alongside a community of people who live and work in and around the caves.

Their industry is bird's nests, another subject of our filming here. The nests are made by cave swiftlets; tiny birds that forage high over the forest by day. At dusk they spiral down in great clouds and just as the light is fading stream into the caves. As they enter the darkness they produce a cacophony of clicks, echo locating their way to their nesting sites situated on the precipitous cave walls.



Their nests are made from their spit, which is delivered in fine sticky strings and built in layers to form delicate, glass like nests.



These are the base for the famous bird's nest soup, so sought after in China. Harvests of these nests are made each year before the birds lay eggs. The swiftlets are then left to build another nest in which they raise their family. After the chicks have fledged the old nest too is harvested. The men who gather

the nests from the walls do so from flimsy looking bamboo and rope structures, often dangling hundreds of feet above the floor of the cave.

**...this filled me with dread...**

We, on the other hand, brought steel scaffold into the cave to get close to the swiftlets nesting wall. Humping that lot up and down the hill definitely helped the scaffold crew shed a few pounds! When I arrived on location, the scaffold was almost ready, but I was greeted with the news that we had just 2 days to do the filming! The nests are extremely valuable to the collectors and the colony we were due to film was also due to have their nests harvested before they laid eggs. There was no room for negotiation, and this filled me with dread.

Though the birds are disturbed by the nest harvest, there was no way I was going to risk disturbance through filming. The reason I do this job is because I admire and respect the subjects I work with. To disturb the swiftlets in any way, defeated the very premise of my ethics. But two days! I had been briefed to use white light, which the birds would have to grow accustomed to over time. How much time, I didn't know. After the first night I feared the worst. The birds were sensitive to the white light, I had filmed virtually nothing, and decided to abandon the efforts to ensure no disturbance after sitting for hours in the gloom, shining dim torches on the colony to acclimatise them.



We entered the cave the next evening, the last chance to see the nests, with very low expectations. But after a gentle

start, something clicked and the birds all remained settled with the lights on. From that point we were able to witness what few others ever had; very close views of white nest swiftlets nest building, the fine strands of sticky saliva pouring from the corners of their mouths like gossamer threads.

## ...The wall are littered with alien beasts...

The atmosphere in these great caverns is other-worldly. The floor is deep in guano from bats and birds. There is no light apart from the occasional faint glow from one of the cave workers huts, or perhaps a beam of sunlight that pierces the gloom from a skylight for some 20 minutes at midday. The walls are



littered with alien beasts; long legged millipedes or cockroaches feeling their way in the dark, or perhaps the beautiful cave racer snakes that move silently around the rocks looking for a stray bat or bird. All in all, a wonderful experience. Of course if wading through bat guano, (and the litter left by numerous generations of nest collectors) puts you on edge, the

view outside is just as special.

I find working in caves very peaceful. You begin to lose track of time with little or no reference to the rhythm of the day. The sounds around you become all enveloping, and when the torches go off, the tinniest rustle or crack grabs your attention.

The world outside comes as a shock to the senses. Green jungle, hissing with life. I've seen 5 species of primate, including proboscis monkeys along the river at dawn, and numerous other mammals and birds that are entirely new to me, from tree shrews to pigmy squirrels, no bigger than mice. The natural richness of the country is clear, but also clear is the pressure to change forest into farmland. Oil palm is planted everywhere ancient forest once stood. It's also clear that the forest can pay it's way, but that will take revenue from tourism. If you're interested in visiting the region, then visit [www.wildasia.net](http://www.wildasia.net) for more details.

I'm in the UK for a couple of weeks, filming Black Grouse in Wales, and preparing for a trip to the Arctic in April to film wolves. Also on the cards is a fund raising talk I shall be giving on May 16<sup>th</sup> in London, to support Lewa Wildlife Conservancy in Kenya, the reserve where I filmed the Cheetah brothers. For details of this, go to [www.lewa.org](http://www.lewa.org) . Oh, and it looks like we shall be going back to the Masai Mara in the autumn for another Big Cat Week. Lots of other travels and adventures in store before then. I'll be writing about it all. See you soon

Simon