

BATS

BY ROBIN KEMP

It is not of cricket bats that I propose to write. All I know of cricket bats is that in my school days I became fixed with the ambition to possess a cricket bat.

After several weeks of careful finance I amassed the sum of 3s. 6d. and became the proud possessor of a real cricket bat.

I cannot call to mind doing anything particular with it. My only vivid recollection of our boarding school cricket field is of a terrible fight between myself and a Sheffield boy. I was the smallest boy in the school ; we were both supposed to be fielding. We rolled over and over each other, but it finished up by the Sheffield boy's head being plastered over with something that took a deal of washing off. Cows were kept in that cricket field. The little boy got the best of the fight, but the worst of the master's punishment.

My three-and-sixpenny bat was soon afterwards swopped for something in the natural history line. I think the items were some birds' eggs and a dead barn owl. So ended my cricket enthusiasm.

But it is the flying mammals known as bats which interest me far more than cricket bats.

In the Mendip Hills of Somersetshire are many limestone caves. With another ardent spirit of similar tastes to my own I used to explore those caves in search of bats. Our expeditions were fraught with some danger and seldom crowned with much success, even from our point of view, for bats are elusive creatures. Deep in the caverns we would thrust our small hands into cracks and crannies and drag forth to the light of day perhaps three or four shivering squeaking skinny bats. Great then was our satisfaction.

In these later days I still find satisfaction, but of a more subdued kind, in capturing bats.

Here in Africa, far up on the remote unpeopled heights of Mount Elgon, I find a cave. A great waterfall makes a screen in front of the cave. The negroes with me run about

like children, shouting and laughing to hear the echoes, dancing in the spray of the waterfall, and leaping from one soft moss-covered rock to another. Behind the waterfall I see the rotting huts, some thirty in number, the old homes of a departed race of cave dwellers. But my first thoughts are of bats.

What a place for them! I can smell their unmistakable odour. And here there seems to be a possibility of finding an unknown species.

So soon as the excitement of my Ethiopians has abated I send them back to get a candle. When they return we form an expedition into the interior. Carefully clambering up and up, over enormous masses of rock and across chasms, we eventually find ourselves almost out of sight of the hazy glimmer of the daylight and in the place where the ceiling or roof ought to be. But on throwing a stone upwards I find the ceiling has risen even more than we have and is far above us. Moving slowly on, the rocks get very slippery with the accumulations of bat droppings through countless ages.

And now a shower of stones from us disturbs the winged inmates of this dark and drear abode.

Hundreds, nay, thousands of bats fill the noisome air, we hear their shrill squeaks, we feel the movement of the air from their wings upon our faces. But with the candle we cannot see anything, save only about one square foot of rock sufficient to take the next step safely. No glimmer of daylight penetrates thus far. We continue our showers of stones at random, and after a time I direct all the natives to grope round and try to feel if any bat has been killed. The result is nothing. So we continue our underground battle for an hour or more, but still with no result.

I tell the boys to remain where they are while I return towards the entrance. Just at the twilight part of the entrance dome I take my stand with a collector's gun, ready to shoot if I can get an aiming sight at a bat. I then give a signal to the boys inside to recommence their showers of stones.

Some bats come past me, pause to hang to the roof! no! they don't stop! there is one! no! I can't see him! yes! there is another . . . bang!

I think I heard a something. I step gingerly forward,

afraid of those slippery chasms, feeling with both hands on the dirty rocks for a skinny furry bat. It takes a long time, but at last I feel what I am after. Yes . . . it is a bat . . . then I did hit him!

The boys come down from the dread darkness up above and together we clamber out to the daylight, all glad to leave that fit abiding place for Apollyon.

And what does the prize prove to be? It proves to be a new species of Mountain Fruit bat, and I think we have earned it.

In different places I pursue different methods. In the forest I hang up a fine silken net at evening. In the open country I take my stand with a small gun at sundown prepared for the passing of the bats from sleeping quarters to feeding places. The natives I send out at the same time with thin sticks having a few thorns or twigs left at the top ends, to work such havoc as they may. We ransack old hut roofs. We wander in and out among the banana plantations with sticks, stones and gun. I offer all and sundry natives a price for each dead bat brought to me.

So we get them, perhaps one by one, or maybe a basketful of shivery, shaky dead bats all at once.

Then comes the making of them into specimens! With wings nearly folded and not outstretched, and the labels recording measurements and data tied on.

For bats are an interesting branch of natural history. Less limited in their geographical movements than terrestrial animals, but more restricted than migratory birds, they present problems for solution and theories to puzzle at unlike any other branch of life.

Much remains to be done in collecting and examining specimens from remote parts of the world—islands and continents, tropical and temperate—before our knowledge can near completion.

Their skeletons, teeth, and exterior characteristics are the principal details by which they may be classified. No bat has less than twenty teeth or more than thirty-eight teeth. No bat yet known possesses twenty-two teeth.

One thousand forms, more or less, are known from through-

out the world, the number being augmented from time to time by new discoveries in remoter parts.

And who shall state what is the good of this striving to find all the existing forms, of publishing treatises on the measurements of their skulls, the shape of their teeth, their exterior colouring, their geographical range, their habits, their food and their parasites?

Yes—that is a difficult question to answer.

What is the good of it all?

A good retort would be to ask what is the use of the study of distant stars, of the antarctic regions, of folk-lore, of the depths of the sea, or of the history of art.

Perhaps it is because of a thirst for information which will never be assuaged.

NOTES

BIG GAME AND TSETSE FLIES

The following is taken from *The Field* of October 7, 1911. It is reprinted in our Journal as the connexion between big game and tsetse flies has been much discussed here. Much has been written on the subject and much more will assuredly be written before any definite conclusion is arrived at. The report reprinted here gives us an idea of what others are doing and may help somewhat towards the solution of a problem which is of supreme interest to all lovers of the magnificent fauna of the Protectorate. (Editors).

REPORT TO THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE NATAL AND ZULULAND GAME PROTECTION ASSOCIATION OF THE SUB-COMMITTEE APPOINTED TO INQUIRE INTO THE LIFE HISTORY OF GLOSSINA MORSITANS AND GLOSSINA PALLIPEDES AND THEIR RELATION TO GAME ANIMALS.

Tsetse flies are confined to Africa; they occur in Sierra Leone, Gold Coast, Congo, Lake Chad, Somaliland, and East