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**18<sup>th</sup> International Bat Research Conference in Phuket, Thailand,  
28 July – 1 August 2019**

This summer I found myself on a plane bound for Bangkok. I was due to attend the 18th International Bat Research Conference in Phuket, my first time presenting a talk to an international conference and my first time in Southeast Asia, safe to say I was nervous! I needn't have been, the Thai people are fairly renowned for their hospitality and the international bat research community is welcoming, open and friendly. My talk was scheduled for day 3 (of 4) so I had a few days to attend talks, getting a feel for the mood of the conference and gauging the difficulty of the post-talk questions being posed to presenters.

The conference was attended by 400 researchers from around the world, researching all aspects of bat biology. My own area of research interest is the impacts of land use change on natural systems, and at present I employ genetic techniques and bats to investigate this. The varied programme of talks meant that I enjoyed many relevant presentations in closely related areas of research. This included a full day on diet and foraging ecology - which I thoroughly enjoyed and has helped me to shift into gear to tackle the next chapter of my PhD project which will focus on this theme. But I was also exposed to diverse research from a range of disciplines, from evolutionary genetics to conservation, and from disease transmission and prediction to emerging technologies and techniques employed to research bats.

I presented some preliminary data from one strand of my PhD project in a talk entitled "The impacts of agricultural and urban expansion on the gut microbiota and conservation of desert bats". Although I expected to be one of a number of researchers presenting genetic work, I wasn't aware just how much work is underway to characterise bat-associated microbiotas. I was pleasantly surprised when a few weeks before the conference, I opened the programme to see a full two-hour session jam-packed with researchers presenting work on bat-microbe symbiosis and interactions, and my own talk in the middle. The talks gave such an interesting offering that I forgot to be nervous until I was standing at the podium, and speaking alongside them provided the perfect setting to meet researchers working in similar fields from all over the world, as well as compare my results to those gained in similar studies. Speaking at a taxon-specific conference also allowed me to practice



Introducing my talk at the 18th International Bat Research Conference in Phuket

communicating my science to a non-genetic-fluent audience and provided a platform and opportunity to receive feedback from other scientists on my methods and results.

The social nature of the meeting was one of the highlights for me. Bat researchers are few in number but great in the spirit of friendship, keen to collaborate, enthusiastic to share ideas, and above all imbued with an unwavering reverence for the wonder of the natural world. It was surreal to meet "IRL" other scientists that I'd been communicating with over Twitter for many months, and even more exciting to make new connections with researchers whose work I was entirely unfamiliar with. I was lucky to get a place on the post-conference trip, which was unsurprisingly over-subscribed as Dr Pipat had arranged an exciting 3-day tour to observe Thai bats across two western provinces of central Thailand. The fortunate party of 30 bonded over market stalls, long minibus rides and a mutual fascination with all things batty. The highlights of this trip were definitely: seeing the world's smallest bat *Craseonycteris thonglongyai* (Kitti's Hog-nosed Bat) up-close and the incredible two-hour emergence of *Chaerephon plicata* (Wrinkle-lipped free-tailed bats) from a cave near Wat Khao Chong Pran.



The conference was very social in nature and there were many opportunities to network with other bat researchers and opportunities to form collaborations, as well as friendships

The new information, expanded network, and exciting inspiration that have followed me back to the UK has given me a fresh budget of energy with which to approach the final two years of my doctoral training. The exposure of presenting at such a conference has already made an impact on me with new friends to turn to, new connections and expertise to draw on, and new prospects for the future. I would like to take this opportunity to whole-heartedly thank the Royal Society of Biology for supporting my attendance of this conference.