

NOTES

Sightings of the sheath-tailed bat *Coleura seychellensis* Peters, 1868 (Chiroptera: Emballonuridae)

Pat Matyot,
PO Box 321,
SEYCHELLES

Summary: A small bat, believed to be *Coleura seychellensis*, has been observed in flight in the Bel Ombre district on Mahé island, Seychelles. Accounts of the presence of the bat on Silhouette, obtained from past and present inhabitants of the island, are given.

Introduction

The last published accounts of observations on the endemic sheath-tailed bat *Coleura seychellensis* Peters, 1868 of Seychelles are those of Nicoll & Suttie (1982) and Racey & Nicoll (1984). Both reports give only Praslin and La Digue islands as localities where the species has been observed from 1972 to 1980. There are no recent first hand accounts of sightings of the species on Mahé and Silhouette.

Sightings on Mahé

Sightings of a very small bat, presumably *C. seychellensis*, in flight in one locality on Mahé in 1993 and 1994 suggest that the species may still roost on Mahé as well. The only other species of bat that is known to occur in the granitic islands of Seychelles is the fruit bat *Pteropus seychellensis* Milne Edwards, 1887 (Chiroptera: Pteropodidae) and the specimens on which this account is based were definitely not of that species. One specimen at a time was sighted on several occasions, but the animal was not recognised to be a bat at first and the dates of the first sightings were not recorded. Also, the pressures of other work did not permit the recording of all sightings even when *C. seychellensis* was suspected. Those dates that were recorded are as follows; 2nd August 1993; 7th August 1993; 8th August 1991; 9th August 1993; 10th July 1994; 28th September 1994; 2nd October 1994.

The locality in question is a drive leading to a house in Marie Laure Estate (=Mount Simpson Estate) in Bel Ombre district. It is 42 metres long and slopes from 95 metres altitude at its upper end to 85 metres altitude at its lower end. The drive is bordered on both sides by trees, mainly *Pterocarpus indicus* Willd. 1809, *Paraserianthes falcataria* (Linnaeus, 1753), *Cinnamomum verum* Presl. *Alstonia macrophylla* Wall. and *Hevea brasiliensis* Willd. 1809. The branches on either side meet above the drive, creating a thin layer of foliage overhead.

Each time, one single bat was observed flying rapidly up and down the drive, veering occasionally from side to side, as low as 1.5-2 metres above the ground. A rustling sound, probably produced by the rapid beat of wings, as well as what may be described as occasional bursts of stridulation-like sound, presumably

NOTES

an audible component of the sound emitted by the bat for echo-location, could clearly be heard. The to and fro flight continued even when the bat was illuminated by a torch. A considerable number of small insects, including various unidentified micro-moths, were observed fling about a short distance from the ground, it is possible that the bat was feeding on them. Most of the sightings were made at between 10pm and midnight, the flights lasted for as long as the bat was watched; usually for about half an hour. In one case, on 7th August 1993, the bat was observed in flight between 11.30pm and midnight, but was no longer there when a further check was made later at 1am. On 8th August 1993 it was seen at around midnight but vanished when a moderate wind arose about 15 minutes later.

Nicoll & Suttie (1982) suspected *C. seychellensis* to fly "with relatively little manoeuvrability" and also referred to its supposedly "high-flying tendencies". The way the bats observed navigated very precisely back and forth within the confines of the "corridor" of the drive and surrounding trees, at the low height indicated above, suggests otherwise.

Racey & Nicoll (1984) confirm that all known roosts of *C. seychellensis* are inside boulder caves. Cliffs and boulders abound in the vicinity of the drive, but preliminary searches have not uncovered any roosting sites.

Accounts of *C. seychellensis* on Silhouette

There are very few published accounts of *C. seychellensis* on Silhouette. Recent attempts to locate roosts at Gratte Fesse have not been successful (Oxford University Silhouette Expedition 1990). Nicoll & Suttie (1982) quote Beckett as reporting that on that island, *C. seychellensis* "is seen most often during bad weather, when it forages in the settlement areas, occasionally entering buildings". In view of the lack of information on the distribution and habits of *C. seychellensis* on Silhouette, it was decided to conduct interviews with present inhabitants of Silhouette with persons who lived island, to find out if they had observed *C. seychellensis*, which is known as "sousouri bannann" (literally "banana bat") in the Seychellois Creole language.

Three interesting accounts were obtained. An eighty-three year old man who lived on Silhouette in the 1930's reported seeing *C. seychellensis* in a boulder cave above Anse Mondon in the north of the island. He claimed that one had to be careful when entering the cave because as the disturbed bats flew out they could inflict scratches with their claws. The same informant said that kestrels "and other birds of prey" attacked the bats when they left the cave.

A sixty-six year-old man who lived on Silhouette from 1949 to 1968 reported seeing large numbers of *C. seychellensis* huddled together in a cave above a swamp called "Merkir" (spelt as pronounced) at Grande Barbe on the western side of the island.

Finally, a fifty-one year old man who has lived on Silhouette all his life reported having observed *C. seychellensis* flying around at La Passe, on the eastern

NOTES

side, shortly before sunset in rainy weather, especially during the north-west monsoon. He added that the bats occasionally roosted in dark corners of the ceiling of the "Grande Case", once the residence of Dauban family, the former owners of Silhouette.

Logistical constraints did not make it possible to carry out searches in the localities mentioned by the three informants to verify if *C. seychellensis* still occurs there.

Conclusion

In view of the scanty information available on the biology and ecology of *C. seychellensis*, it is necessary to carry out further studies on this rare and probably threatened species. The observations reported above tend to suggest that its continued if precarious presence on Mahé, but its current status on Silhouette is unclear.

References

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