

Preface

If Les Hall hadn't introduced me to bats in 1968, when I was still in my teens, life would have been quite different – and probably very boring and ordinary. At the time, we were both working on rabbits, as technicians in CSIRO's Wildlife Division. Les mentioned one afternoon that he was going to a cave at Wee Jasper, so I joined him for a short adventure that ignited my passion. He caught some Eastern Bentwing Bats to check for banded ones, and told me lots of stories: how they moved hundreds of kilometres each year, how they could see with sound, and how the females stayed without their boyfriends when they were having babies. Even then, Les was just as he is today – a totally fascinating bat enthusiast – and I was hooked! Back at work we were able to look at specimens in the National Wildlife Collection, so I got to know Australian bats in my lunchtimes. Needless to say, our travels for rabbits soon became bat-focused, and I began to learn about bat species in desert areas.

Incensed because bats were excluded from Environmental Impact Statements in the mid-1970s – due to the fact that the authorities maintained 'there was no way for people to identify them' – Les decided that we would write the first ever field guide to Australian bats (published in 1979). Several years of work was to be given free to the Queensland Museum, on the proviso that they would not sell the book for more than one dollar. That way, there was no excuse for anybody not to have one!

On a six-year transfer to north Queensland in the 1980s, I got to know tropical bats and began to learn how to identify them with new-fangled equipment that displayed their calls – hands-free identification. By this stage we were exploring exotic places in Australia, such as Cape York, the Top End and the Kimberley, and we made many trips to Torres Strait. Twenty years after

introducing me to bats, Les took me to Borneo where he had done a lot of work in the field (he is now finishing a book about the bats of that amazing island). This was my first trip overseas, and bats have been instrumental in taking me to more than 20 countries, many of them with Les.

We both have lifelong memories of these trips. I can remember walking through falling snow in London to the British Museum of Natural History, reviewing Australian bat specimens in a freezing concrete vault, and holding in my hand a Little Pied Bat, the original specimen from which the species was described. My emotions overtook me because the first person to hold this bat was the famous explorer, Captain Charles Sturt. While he was stuck at Depot Glen (western NSW) during his famous expedition to find the 'inland sea', the poor bat flew into his tent and he swatted it with his shirt and here was I holding the very same animal. Almost 20 years later, another of my special experiences was again holding a bat, but this time it was the smallest species of fishing bat in the world, which I caught in the Lao PDR. You can see in the picture that it has the usual amazing hooked claws as do all fishing bats, but this bat weighed less than a 5-cent coin, and its body is shorter than the end of my thumb. How wonderful to be an old man now, and still able to be astonished by these animals after so many decades of study!

When Les first went to work at the CSIRO in 1962 he was more interested in birds than bats. A background in cave exploring soon saw him on bat banding trips with David Purchase, Ken Simpson and John McKean, and his interest became embedded. A passion for studying bats has taken Les on many trips around Australia and eventually to Borneo. One of his delights is to enter a cave for the first time and find it inhabited by bats, and then to find out what species they are. Also, the thrill of discovery when checking mist-nets and bat traps to see what species has been caught is most exciting and compensates for all the long night-time hours spent trying to catch these fascinating animals.

Les has many interesting stories about his experiences searching for bats. They vary from investigating complaints about bat droppings on the linen of a church altar to the sheer



The smallest species of fishing bat in the world – found in the Lao PDR.