

A blizzard of bats

Africa's biggest mammal migration is not to be found in the Masai Mara or Serengeti. Instead, **Nick Garbutt** travels to a remote corner of Zambia where millions of bats gather to feast on wild forest fruits...

The migration of wildebeest, zebra and other grazers in the Serengeti and Masai Mara is one of the world's most celebrated wildlife spectacles, but it is not Africa's greatest mammal migration. Elsewhere on the continent there is a gathering that outnumbers the Serengeti and Masai Mara concentrations by

five or six times. Incredibly, these animals gather into a space barely larger than the area of three or four rugby pitches.

From mid-October to early December, some 10 to 12 million straw-coloured fruit bats (*Eidolon helvum*) converge on Kasanka National Park in Zambia. They are thought to travel from all corners of Sub-Saharan Africa, enticed

by the abundance of wild fruit delicacies like musuku, mufinsa and water berries.

The fruit bats take up residence in an area of mushitu swamp forest that is barely more than two to three hectares in extent. By day the bats roost in the trees, packing themselves around trunks and along branches, which often break under the sheer weight of bats!

Predator threats

The colonies are noisy and agitated as the bats are easily disturbed and wary of predators including raptors like fish eagles, martial eagles and crowned eagles that patrol the area when the bats are in residence. On the ground small crocodiles, pythons and Nile monitors clean up any bats that are injured or elderly and fall to the ground.

At dusk the noisy chatter and activity within the colony increases. Scouting bats fly out first, and then in a seemingly ordered fashion the entire colony streams out from the roost in search of food. For more than half an hour the sky is full of bats as far as the eye can see, as they disperse in all directions from the forest. Most bats stay away for the night, covering up to 100km before returning around

dawn, although many continue to arrive up to one hour after sunrise.

Visitors to Kasanka are able to view this amazing spectacle – one of the world's great wildlife wonders – at dawn and dusk, from specific viewing areas and purpose-built platforms overlooking the roosting area. No-one is allowed to enter the bat forest, as the animals are so susceptible to disturbance.



A blizzard of bats!
Thousands of bats take
flight from their daytime
roosts in the evergreen
Mushitu swamp forest,
disturbed by a predator,
probably a raptor

Nikon D3s, Nikkor 200-
400mm f/4 at 400mm,
ISO 1250, 1/500sec at f/5.6

Encounters

A bat takes flight from its roost, while others get ready to follow

*Nikon D3S, Nikkor 500mm f/4,
ISO 4000, 1/125sec at f/5.6*



Encounters



At dusk, the bats leave their daytime roost to search for food. They will cover up to 100km before returning at dawn

Nikon D3, Nikkor 500mm f/4, ISO 2000, 1/125sec at f/5.6, flash

“The colonies are noisy and agitated as the bats are easily disturbed and wary of predators”



By day the bats roost in trees, packing themselves around trunks and along branches, which often break under the sheer weight of bats

Nikon D300s, Nikkor 500mm f/4, ISO 1000, 1/250sec at f/8



Backlit by the sunrise, dozens of bats take flight after being disturbed by a predator, probably a large raptor such as a fish eagle or crowned eagle

Nikon D3s, Nikkor 200-400mm f/4 at 360mm, ISO 500, 1/5000sec at f/8



Local school children proudly wearing Kasanka Trust T-shirts on a visit to the national park to see the mass aggregations of straw-coloured fruit bats

Nikon D3s, Nikkor 70-200mm
f/2.8 at 140mm, ISO 640,
1/100sec at f/5.6



**Straw-coloured fruit bats
silhouetted against the
orange dawn sky as they
return to their forest roost**

*Nikon D3s, Nikkor 500mm f/4,
ISO 400, 1/1250sec at f/5.6*

Encounters

See for yourself

Nick Garbutt is taking a photography tour to Kasanka and South Luangwa National Park in November 2015. This will offer plenty of opportunity to photograph the amazing bat migration as well as many other wildlife riches in Zambia. For more information:

- <http://www.wildlifeworldwide.com/group-tours/luangwa-a-blizzard-of-bats>
- <http://www.nickgarbutt.com>

Local school children watch intently as the sky fills with millions of bats leaving their roosts at dusk

Nikon D3s, Nikkor 14-24mm f/2.8 at 17mm, ISO 4000, 1/250sec at f/6.3

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A qualified zoologist, **Nick Garbutt** has been a professional wildlife photographer since 1996 and is the author or co-author of six books, including *Mammals of Madagascar*, *Wild Borneo* and *Chameleons*. He has twice been a category winner in Wildlife Photographer of the Year. Nick leads wildlife photo tours to Madagascar, Borneo, the Pantanal, the Serengeti and Kasanka.

- <http://www.nickgarbutt.com>