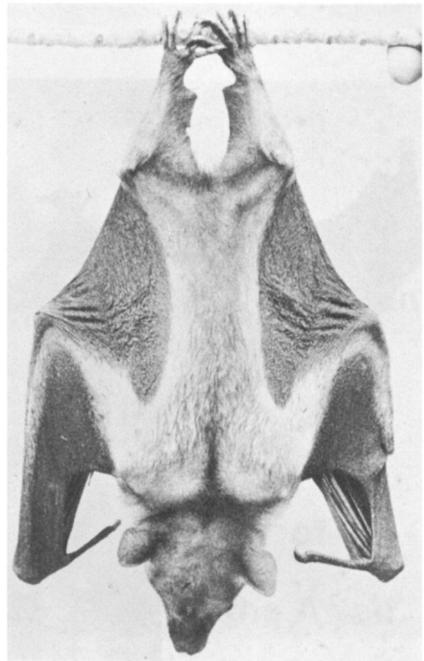


**Fruit Bats for Meat:
are too
many taken?**

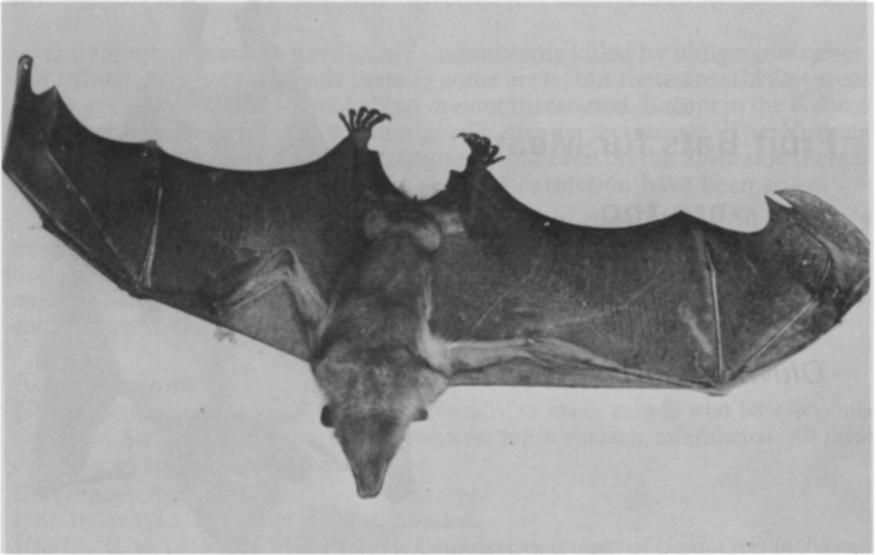
Oluwadare Funmilayo



Nigerian people eat meat mainly from wild animals, and the straw-coloured fruit bat is a popular meat in the south-west, where colonies may number a million animals. But the killing methods are inefficient and wasteful, and no management of the populations is attempted. The author suggests there is need to improve the former and embark on the latter if this valuable resource is to be conserved.

The bulk of Nigerian meat comes from wild animals, ranging from rats to squirrels, monkeys, antelopes and also birds. The animals are taken by catapults, snares, traps, guns, and in the case of birds a sticky plant latex, and the meat is eaten by the hunter, his family and friends; only a small amount is sold. It is not unusual for a particular local community or religious or cultural group to have an aversion to the meat of some animals, including some bats, because of taboos² or other reasons, but the straw-coloured fruit bat *Eidolon helvum* is eaten by all communities in south-west Nigeria. This bat contains no endoparasites; the only insect parasite found on its skin, *Cyclopodia greeffi*, itself contained no parasites, and the species is not definitely known to be associated with viruses.

This fruit bat is widely distributed in Nigeria.⁴ In the south-west large roosting colonies containing thousands, sometimes up to a million, bats have been found in exposed roosts on top of high trees and in oil palm trees. By their feeding and roosting activities the bats damage many wild and cultivated plants and pollute the surroundings with their excrement. Full-time hunters are employed to shoot them for restaurants and hotels. Most people eat the whole bat with membranes, bones and entrails, but some discard the head and entrails, which would be wise if bats were found to carry viruses in the salivary glands. A freshly killed and undressed bat sells for N.20 in the villages and N.30 in the cities. As an adult bat weighs approximately 250g, this means that 1kg of



bat meat sells for between N.80 and N1.20 (N1.00 = US \$1.62 = £0.72). This is much cheaper than 1kg of beef at N2.00 or more.

Like all wildlife, however, the bat is a natural resource that could be exhausted all too soon if sound management techniques are not used. The present killing methods are inefficient and wasteful (and cruel), many bats being merely wounded by the dane guns that are commonly used, and dead or wounded bats are often not recovered because of the thick, tangled vegetation around the roosting trees.

Nothing is known about the natural factors that encourage or repress population growth in the straw-coloured fruit bat, or on what age category these factors have maximum effects. Babies are carried about safely anchored to the mothers' mammae (with teeth) and abdomen (with leg claws) until they are capable of independent existence, which gives them a high chance of survival. But survival from juvenile stage to adult involves more risks, and possibly most deaths occur at this stage. The strong colonial habits of the species and the food shortage, particularly in the dry season when fruit is relatively scarce, are likely to play a major role in the regulation of population numbers.

No laws, customs or taboos protect the straw-coloured fruit bat from exploitation in any part of its range in south-west Nigeria. Clearly there is a need to regulate shooting in the exposed roosting colonies, and the increasing demands for the meat make some form of management important if the species is to continue to be exploited.

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