



Lesser short-nosed fruit bat (*Cynopterus brachyotis*) roosting, Bukit Sarang Conservation Area, Bintulu, Borneo, Malaysia

Photo: Chien C. Lee

Through the Lens

Bat photographer Chien Lee shares what he loves about his work

by Annika S. Hipple

Wildlife photographer Chien Lee specializes in documenting the biological diversity of southeast Asia. Originally from California's Bay Area, but based in northwest Borneo since 1996, he worked in environmental education and conservation before turning to photography full-time.

How did you become a wildlife photographer?

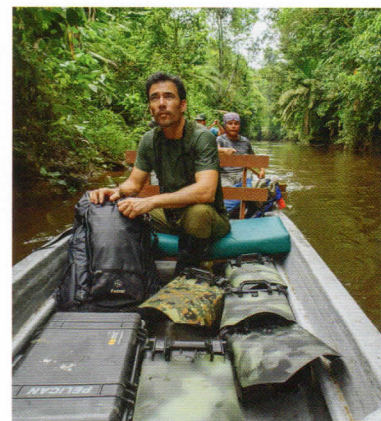
Photography started as a hobby, and when I moved out to Borneo, it became a very serious hobby, because I realized that a lot of the flora and fauna I was encountering had never been photographed before. Being able to document a new species or observe new behavior—adding to our knowledge of this huge jigsaw puzzle that's tropical ecology—is very satisfying work. I also like being able to share the joy of these discoveries. A lot of people here grow up without much exposure to environmental education. It makes me feel like these photos are helping to open up people's perceptions about nature.

Can you share any photography tips?

It's very important to take the time to understand your subject before you even attempt to get a photo. When you take the time to learn its habitat, its flowering cycle, its feeding area, or more about its behavior, it enables you to accurately convey that type of information in the photograph. A lot of people just want to put on a big lens and run out and take photos of colorful birds, but if you take the time to learn more about your subject, it's always more rewarding.

What's it like photographing bats?

Compared to other types of nature photography, photographing bats is much more challenging, especially if you want to capture images of them exhibiting natural behavior. Being flying creatures and nocturnal, it requires a lot of specialized techniques. Some of the bat photos I have worked on have been in controlled environments—for example, working in flight tents—but whenever possible, we try to get photos in the field, ideally without altering the behavior of the bat at all. Because it's so difficult to capture these kinds of images, coming away with something that showcases the behavior of one of our native bats is always rewarding.



Chien C. Lee

Photo: Frank Pichardo

What's your most memorable bat photography experience?

One of my most satisfying bat photos is of a short-nosed fruit bat taking figs from a native fig tree. This image is special to me because it was photographed in my backyard here in northwestern Borneo and was the culmination of many years. I actually planted this fig from seed and had to grow the tree for a couple of years before it started to bear fruits. As soon as it did, the bats would come in nightly. Having this scene 15 meters from my back door enabled me to get the image I wanted.

Another interesting bat I've worked with here is one that lives inside a pitcher plant, *Kerivoula hardwickii*. It would squeeze itself inside and sleep there all day long, and it would leave its urine and droppings behind, which is how the plant gets nutrients. The story behind it was fascinating because it's the first time that a bat has been shown to have a mutualism with a pitcher plant. 🦇