

## ANIMALS IN TRINIDAD CAVES

*(Summary of the lecture by Miss J. Darlington delivered at the regular monthly meeting on 11th July, 1968.)*

The faunas of tropical caves are typically unspecialised, i.e. the species which occur inside caves are found outside also. Caves are dark, hence no green plants can grow. Animals that feed on leaves, fruits or plant juices are therefore excluded as permanent residents. Predators which hunt by sight are also unable to live in caves. However, an animal which can manage to live in darkness is at an advantage because competition is reduced, e.g. in Tamana Cave, in the Central Range, there are 50 resident species compared with thousands in the forest outside.

Nocturnal animals which feed outside, and spend the day inside, are very important in the economy of a cave. Most abundant are the bats, which exploit various food sources including insects, fruit, mammalian blood, nectar and fish. In some Trinidad caves the Oilbird *Steatornis caripensis*, is found, and this feeds on the fruit of palm trees. Both bats and oilbirds deposit large quantities of organic matter in the caves in the form of faeces or guano.

Guano-eating animals exploit this as a source of food. They include beetles, millipedes and cockroaches. Many of these species normally live in rotten wood, which provides a similar moist, dark, highly organic habitat. Thus, cave life does not require any change in their habits.

Predatory centipedes, Amblypygids, and crickets exploit the rich guano-eating fauna. They normally hide in crevices under bark, or under fallen leaves in the forests during the day, and hunt at night using their sense of touch. Living in a cave means that they can hunt by day as well as by night. Many other species live in the mouths of caves, where there may be some light, or they may accidentally fall in and be unable to leave. Some of the latter may die, or, if they survive, will not be able to breed, e.g. the 'Crapeaud'.

Tropical caves may be dangerous to health. They often contain the fungus *Histoplasma capsulatum* which can cause a lung disease. Bats may carry rabies, the virus of which can infect the lungs of cave explorers who breathe the damp air, Poisonous snakes may enter caves to moult. If you visit a cave be careful to avoid falls, and always carry more than one light.