

BATS EVICTED FROM MANIPUR CAVE FOR TOURISM, SAYS STUDY

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New bat found in Manipur **SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT**

A colony of bats was evicted from a Manipur cave system with a Palaeolithic past to make it tourist-friendly, a zoological study that recorded new fauna in the State has said.

The Khangkhui, locally called Khangkhui Mangsor, is a natural limestone cave about 15 km from Ukhrlul, the headquarters of Ukhrlul district. Excavations carried out by Manipur's archaeologists had revealed the cave was home to Stone Age communities.

The cave was also used as a shelter by the local people during World War 2 after the Japanese forces advanced to Manipur and the adjoining Nagaland. More importantly for conservationists, the cave housed large roosting populations of bats belonging to the Rhinolophidae and Hipposideridae families.

A study published in the *Journal of Threatened Taxa* by researchers from the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI) cited local guides as saying that the bats were killed and evicted from the Khangkhui cave after 2016-17 purportedly to make it "more tourist-friendly".

The researchers – Uttam Saikia and A.B. Meetei, both from ZSI's North East Research Centre in Shillong – recorded Blyth's horseshoe bat in the Khangkhui cave during two extensive field surveys covering nine districts of Manipur in 2019 and 2021.

This bat was one of 12 new species added to Manipur's mammalian fauna. The others included the ashy roundleaf bat, the intermediate horseshoe bat, the northern woolly horseshoe bat, the greater false vampire bat, the hairy-faced bat, Hodgson's bat, Hutton's tube-nosed bat and the round-eared tube-nosed bat.

Shanngam Shaliwo, the Divisional Forest Officer of the area, denied any planned extermination of the flying mammals. "No such killing of bats has been reported in our office," he told *The Hindu*. He said the cave has been steeped in the folklore of the dominant Tangkhul community, whose ancestors believed it was the abode of a protective deity.

The study also mentions places in Manipur where bats are eaten for "supposed medicinal properties or as a supplementary source of protein".

"In Wailou village in Chandel district, we were informed that people do occasionally hunt bats in a nearby cave although this practice is not widespread throughout the state. Another serious threat we noticed is the death of bats as unintended victims of illegal bird trappings," the study said.

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