Night Life

Feast After Dark

Bats are the only mammals with the ability of true flight. This in combination with their nocturnal habit has made them masters of a unique ecological niche, the night sky. Many fruit bat species are known to have coevolved with their host plants. Presented here is one example of bat-plant interaction from India.

The tropical deciduous Mahua trees flower between the months of March and May and bear fruits between the months of June and August. They are exclusively dependent on fruit bats for their pollination (chiropterophily) and seed dispersal (chiropterochory). Their flowers and fruits show adaptations that are specialized for attracting bats, wherein their flowers exhibit nocturnal anthesis (night blooming) and emit strong musky odor to attract fruit bats. Their fruits remain drab green even after ripening so as to make themselves less attractive to diurnal visitors.

The fruit bats then feast on the fleshy corolla of the flower and carry away the fruit, that weighs up to half the weight of the bats themselves, from the parent tree. Thus, fruit bats (*Cynopterus sphinx*, in picture) inadvertently help in the pollination and seed dispersal of these trees while foraging on them. Despite such significant ecological services rendered by fruit bats, most fruit bat species are considered as vermin and have received little conservation attention.

Photos by Mahandran V, IISER Mohali