

Nature note - night lives

As the winter solstice approaches, we are spending more of our time each day in the dark, much of it unconscious and asleep. But that's just when many animals are awake and most active, as revealed in an excellent exhibition I went to recently at the London Natural History Museum, *Life after Dark*. We have an atavistic fear of the night, of course, a reminder of our Palaeolithic past, when it really was lights out when the sun went down and humans were then at their most vulnerable to all manner of scary creatures. The exhibition features a fair few of these – snakes, scorpions, giant cockroaches, whip spiders and vampire bats – designed to make you shiver, squeal and squirm, even though they are all safely behind glass. And you are invited to put your hand blindly into a dark hole and see what touches it – a test of nerve even for the most rational.

There is also a strong educational message to the exhibition, explaining the extraordinary sensory adaptations to darkness some of these animals have evolved. You approach one case and see a weird, glowing image of yourself as you would appear in the infra-red vision of a deadly pit-viper, preparing to strike. Then there are the kiwis and moles that have sensitivities of touch or smell far beyond our



Contributed

Night fisherman

capacities even to imagine. Most people know about the echo location of bats, which emit high-pitched sounds to give them detailed, acoustic maps of their surroundings to help them hunt down their prey (mainly moths); but I hadn't realised that some moths have evolved ways of countering this by jamming the airwaves with distracting cries of their own and, in one case, evolving a wing-shape that distorts the bats' sounds and throws them off-course - amazing. Fish too are represented here, since some of them live in such ocean depths that no light ever penetrates their world; and again, their names sound like the cast-list in an old Hammer Films horror movie: the thread-fin dragonfish, the six-gill hagfish and the cookie-cutter shark.

The night-life around here is less exotic and threatening, to be sure, but no less interesting. We have nightjars on the heath in summer, glow-worms along the forest rides, tawny owls in the trees, and a whole army of unseen beetles scavenging through the leaf litter each night. And if you wander across the beach at 3 o'clock in the morning you might well encounter a fox, badger, hedgehog, hare or even an otter going about their nightly business. You might even run into another strange creature on the shoreline, *Homo piscator noctuus*, the hunched figure of an all-night fisherman, not actually catching anything – a much more puzzling species.

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