

Living with Flying Foxes

Health and Conservation issues for people living near flying fox communities

If you live near flying foxes, you may be concerned about risks to your health and curious to know more about them.

Flying foxes are not a health risk to you unless you are bitten or scratched, so please do not handle them.

As forest-makers, flying foxes do a lot of good deeds in our environment. But they are threatened and in decline. To conserve flying foxes we need to share our neighbourhoods and protect their habitat.



Artwork: "Hanging around in Suburbia" by Carmen Beesley Drake, Rockhampton

Introducing your batty neighbours

They seem to squabble a lot, they eat your fruit and you hear they're dangerous. It's no wonder flying foxes aren't the most welcome of neighbours!

But like most neighbours, flying foxes, the biggest of the bats, are really not so bad when you get to know them. A local colony can be something to celebrate.

Flying foxes contribute greatly to the local environment and economy. When they join the commuter rush at dusk, flying foxes are off to their job as forest-makers.

Incurable sweet-tooths, flying foxes eat fruit, nectar and blossom. In the process, they pollinate flowers and disperse seeds of important native trees. Winging their way around the landscape, up to 100 km in a night, flying foxes are responsible for the upkeep of many forest species.

Back from nightly labours, flying foxes hang out together in camps, some of which have been occupied for centuries. There's a lot going on in these camps — courting, parenting, socialising, establishing the social hierarchy and of course snoozing.

Photographs by Halley Design



Black flying fox

Grey-headed flying fox

Spectacled flying fox

Little Red flying fox

Both flying foxes and people like to camp near water, so when their homes overlap, as they increasingly do, there are various inconveniences for all. For the humans, flying foxes can create noise and smell. For the flying foxes — well, humans too have rather annoying habits, with far more serious consequences.

Bat chatter – what have they got to talk about?

Like humans, flying foxes are very social animals and have a lot to say to each other. With more than 30 different calls they can say quite a bit and may be the next most vocal group of mammals after primates.

Flying foxes tend to be most vocal during mating season, disputing exactly who is owner of prime branch territory. Most battles are won by bluster and bluff.

Some calls are special to mothers and young. Mothers carry very young babies out with them while feeding. But the load becomes too much after about 6 weeks and they leave their protesting youngsters behind. On their return to the camp they pick out their young one from the crèche by voice recognition and individual scent.

Camps tend to swell and shrink depending upon the season and how much food is around. Sometimes, large numbers of nomadic little red flying foxes come to town — and that can make a camp a much noisier place. But they only stay a while — maybe a couple of months until the blossom runs out.

Not surprisingly, when flying foxes are stressed or frightened, they make a lot more noise. *Colonies tend to be noisiest when disturbed by people and least noisy when left alone.*

Bat perfume – perhaps not your brand?

Flying foxes smell different from humans. It's not dirtiness — flying foxes spend hours grooming, so their personal hygiene is exemplary.

Their smell helps flying foxes identify each other and communicate things like 'keep your distance'. One dominant odour is a musk-like 'perfume' that males use to mark their breeding territories. What you find smelly, they may find seductive.

Flying foxes only take 15-20 minutes to digest food and mostly defecate away from camps. Mind you, it's best to bring in your washing before dusk and park your car under shelter to prevent staining by the odd dropping, which, by the way, can be easily lifted by leaving a damp rag on top. For information on food trees and bats, refer to www.abs.ausbats.org.au.

Knowing the risks – flying foxes and disease

Humans mostly get diseases from other humans, but sometimes from other animals, including bats. In 1996 Australian bat lyssavirus (ABL) was identified in flying foxes (as well as in one small bat, the yellow-bellied sheathtail bat).

ABL is not a reason to fear bats as it is very rare and preventable. The rate of infection in free living, healthy flying foxes is less than 1 percent. In sick flying foxes the infection rate is believed to be higher than 6 percent, so it is important only vaccinated and trained people should rescue them. Two humans have died from ABL, one after being bitten by a flying fox and one after being bitten by a sheathtail bat. In the same decade 18,000 Australians have died in motor vehicle accidents!

ABL can only be transmitted to people when infected bat saliva comes into contact with human tissue through an open wound or with mucous membrane eg. eyes, nose and mouth. Therefore, it can be avoided by not handling these animals.

You will not be exposed to the virus if flying foxes fly overhead or feed or roost in your garden. Nor is it spread through their droppings or urine, or if you live, play or walk near their colonies.

Flying foxes are associated with rare events where Hendra virus spreads to a horse. Scientists are yet to determine how horses are infected. Hendra virus does not spread to humans from flying foxes. Horse owners should visit the Department of Employment, Economic Development and Innovation website at www.dpi.qld.gov.au/4790_2900.htm for information about protecting their horses from Hendra virus and themselves from sick horses.

Avoid handling flying foxes – cute but not cuddly!

If you come across a sick or injured flying fox or any bat, it is essential that you **DO NOT HANDLE THE ANIMAL but report it to experts**. Like any wild animal in pain or frightened, it is likely to bite or scratch — and that would put both you and the animal at risk. The best help you can provide is to notify those who are trained to handle flying foxes by calling the Department of Environment & Resource Management (DERM) Hotline (1300 130 372), RSPCA (1300 ANIMAL) or your local wildlife care group.

If a flying fox or any bat is on the ground or alone during the day, it almost certainly needs help. Please do your best to find the right person to help. To protect it from domestic animals and birds you could cover it with a box or towel, being careful not to touch it.

What if you get bitten or scratched?

If you are bitten or scratched, wash the wound immediately with soap and running water for about five minutes. Do not scrub the wound. Seek immediate medical attention. If possible, keep the animal for testing. Do not attempt to handle it yourself. If bat saliva contacts the eyes, nose or mouth, flush the area thoroughly with water and seek immediate medical attention.

Reducing the risk

Most people who get bitten or scratched are trying to help flying foxes. So, one of the best ways for communities to minimise the risk of ABL infection is to prevent situations in which humans have to rescue them.

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They most often get into trouble on barbed wire fences, fruit tree nets and powerlines. So for the good of flying foxes and to minimise risk of disease, you should avoid the use of barbed wire and consider safer alternatives (even changing the top strand to plain wire can save wildlife). Use safe netting on fruit trees and remove fruiting or flowering trees near barbed wire fences and under powerlines. If you see a flying fox caught on powerlines, report it as it may have a live baby under its wing.

For backyard fruit trees, if you must net, never use dark monofilament netting; make sure netting is white, thick-knitted and pulled tight so animals cannot get entangled or trapped. Remember that all bats are protected species. It is illegal to harm or destroy native wildlife and heavy fines can be issued to anyone found killing bats.

Conservation issues – the future belongs to bats too!

Many bats, in Australia and globally, are threatened with extinction. Unfortunately, incorrectly tarred by vampire myths, flying foxes are often misunderstood and unpopular. These forest heroes face more than the usual challenges of life in the city.

All flying fox populations are declining at an alarming rate. The grey-headed flying fox population recently dropped by one third, in the short space of ten years! Spectacled flying foxes, too, have greatly declined in number, which could have dire consequences for the World Heritage rainforest areas of north Queensland. Both species are now listed as threatened, meaning there is concern they won't survive.

Major threats to flying foxes are extensive clearing of their feeding territories, destruction of campsites and illegal killing. They may appear plentiful because they live together in colonies, but the truth is their survival is not assured.

Bats and you – sharing the neighbourhood

Unlike many other native animals that appear to us only through television programs, flying foxes live close by, connecting us to the wild in towns and cities. When they are in serious trouble they die publicly on our powerlines, barbed wire fences and in our gardens. The future of flying foxes is dependent on our willingness to share our neighbourhoods with them. We can coexist with respect and understanding.

Please keep safe and don't handle flying foxes. There is no need to get in a flap about them – flapping is what they do best. Enjoy the spectacle of your neighbourhood flying fox!

Need more information?

Australasian Bat Society
www.abs.ausbats.org.au

BatCare Brisbane
www.bats.org.au

Department of Environment and Resource Management
http://www.derm.qld.gov.au/wildlife-ecosystems/wildlife/az_of_animals/bats.html

CSIRO
<http://www.csiro.au/science/Australian-bat-lyssavirus.html>

