



Photos taken by
Dr John McGrath

Living with flying-foxes

Health and Conservation Information 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 understand them better and protect their habitat.

Australian Bat Lyssavirus

Australian Bat Lyssavirus (ABL) is a virus that can be transmitted from bats to humans. It is closely related but not identical to rabies virus, which causes a serious and sometimes fatal disease in humans.

However ABL is not a reason to fear flying-foxes as it is very rare and preventable. ABL can only be transmitted to humans when infected flying-fox saliva comes into contact with human tissue through an open wound or with mucus membrane e.g. eyes, nose and mouth. Therefore it is very important that flying-foxes are not handled.

Humans are not exposed to the ABL if flying-foxes fly overhead or feed or roost in gardens. Nor is it spread through droppings or urine, or if you live, play or walk near their colonies.

Hendra Virus

Hendra virus was first discovered following an outbreak of illness in horses in Brisbane in 1994. While there is understandably community concern about the Hendra virus, it is important to remember that such outbreaks are rare and occur in exceptional circumstances only.

The natural host for Hendra virus is the flying-fox. Under particular circumstances, the virus may spread to horses, horses to horses and rarely from horses to people. There is no indication that humans can catch the virus directly from flying-foxes.

Research has led to the development of a vaccine for horses to protect against the Hendra virus. Horse owners should be aware of possible signs of the virus and follow standard hygiene practices when interacting with any horse.

What if I find a sick or injured flying fox?

If you come across a sick or injured flying-fox, or any bat, it is essential that you report it but **DO NOT HANDLE IT**. Like any wild animal in pain or frightened, it is likely to bite and that would put both you and the animal at risk.

Please report it to those who are trained to handle flying-foxes by immediately calling 1300 ANIMAL (1300 264 625).

What if I am bitten or scratched by a flying-fox?

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 bat saliva contacts your eyes, nose or mouth, flush the area thoroughly with water and seek immediate medical attention. If possible, keep the animal for testing but do not attempt to handle it yourself.

Flying-foxes in Livingstone Shire

There are a number of permanent roosting sites for flying-foxes within Livingstone Shire region. Throughout different times of the year these sites may be home to three different species all of which are protected under Queensland's *Nature Conservation Act 1992*.

Living with flying-foxes con't

The most common and permanent species is the Black Flying-Fox (*Pteropus alecto*). The Little Red Flying-Fox (*Pteropus scapulatus*) are highly mobile and may come and go from a particular site throughout the year. The Grey-Headed Flying-Fox (*Pteropus poliocephalus*) is the least common to be found within the Livingstone Shire. Due to their vulnerable status, the Grey-Headed Flying Fox is federally protected under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Protection Act 1999*.

Flying-fox roosts

Flying-foxes are social animals usually living in large groups called roosts – as small as a dozen animals but usually numbering in the tens or hundreds of thousands. Roosts are at their largest during the breeding season from Spring through to Summer. Roosts provide a rest site and meeting place for social interaction within nightly commuting distance of food. Flying-foxes are intelligent with good memories that enable them to remember the locations of roosts and associated feeding sites.

Why do flying-foxes now roost in certain areas?

The use of roost sites varies – some roosts are permanently occupied, others are used less frequently, and roosting may even occur at a site not previously having been recorded as a roost. Sometimes for reasons not understood, a roost site may move a short distance of a couple of hundred metres. Roosts are typically located near waterways on coastal lowlands – more likely to occur in small patches of bushland near urban development than in large patches of bushland. Consequently, roosts often occur close to residential areas. Given the amount of bushland that has been cleared for development, flying-foxes are likely to have less available roost sites than they once did.

Why are flying-foxes so important?

Flying-foxes are nocturnal mammals that fly up to 50km in a night to feed on fruit, nectar and blossom. In the process, they pollinate flowers and disperse seeds of important native trees – vital for the health and upkeep of many forest species. In turn, these forests provide valuable timber, act as carbon sinks, stabilise our river systems and water catchments, and promote recreation and tourism opportunities returning millions of dollars to our economy each year.

What do flying-foxes eat?

Flying-foxes feed on blossom and fruit in tall trees – mostly the nectar and pollen from eucalyptus, melaleucas and banksias.

They also eat leaves. Their diet includes over 100 species of native trees and vines. This native diet is now supplemented by fruit of introduced plants such as garden and orchard fruit trees, street tree plantings and introduced palms.

Why so noisy?

Like humans, flying-foxes are very social animals. When at a roost or feeding, they squabble loudly. This mixture of screeches and cackles is a language used to establish personal roost sites or feeding territories, ward off rivals, communicate with offspring, and warns others of possible threats. Flying-foxes tend to be most vocal during mating season, spring and summer.

What's that smell?

Flying-fox populations can emit a distinctive and at times very strong odour. This smell is from their scent glands and not a sign of dirtiness – Flying-foxes spend hours grooming so they have very good personal hygiene. The different odours help them to identify each other and communicate within the population. Breeding time can be particularly smelly when males produce musk like 'perfume' to mark their breeding territories.

Can flying-foxes be culled?

No, they are a protected species by law. Flying-foxes number in the millions, are highly mobile and widespread across most areas of Queensland. It would be impractical to try and cull them. The public should not take matters into their own hands by deliberately interfering with flying-fox colonies.

Further Information

If you wish to find out more about flying-foxes, browse the Environment and Heritage Protection website: <https://environment.des.qld.gov.au/wildlife/animals/living-with/bats/flying-foxes>

For more information about Hendra Virus and Lyssavirus, please visit the Queensland Health Bats and Human Health webpage: <http://conditions.health.qld.gov.au/healthcondition/condition/14/217/363/hendra-virus-infection> or the Biosecurity Queensland website: www.daf.qld.gov.au

Please contact Council with any questions or concerns in relation to the above information by phone: (07) 4913 5000 or 1300 790 919 or email: enquiries@livingstone.qld.gov.au