

VOLUME 3, NO. 2 Summer 1986

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Australia's "Bat Mums"

Though Helen George of Sydney, Australia and Helen Luckoff of Brisbane have never met, they share a common love: bats. Both women are wildlife rehabilitators who raise baby flying foxes that are left orphans when their mothers are accidentally electrocuted by power lines or killed in "bat shoots" (see *BATS*, September 1984).

Helen George's commitment began in the spring of 1978 when an officer of the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service presented her with a newborn Grey-headed Flying Fox (*Pteropus poliocephalus*), umbilical cord still attached. She named the baby Peter, and it was the beginning of a love affair. From the first day, the bat made eye contact and greeted her enthusiastically at mealtime, often making contented purring-like sounds from the back of its throat when cuddled or stroked.

There was virtually no information available on how to feed or care for baby flying foxes, so George visited the Ku-ring-gai maternity colony in the Sydney suburb of Gordon to see how mother flying foxes in the wild cared for their young. The Ku-ring-gai colony is the largest, most important maternity site for Grey-headed Flying Foxes in New South Wales. One unusually cold spring morning, George watched the mother bats cradle their single young in their wings to keep them warm. At home, she wrapped Peter in a cloth, placed him head down in a woolen bag beside a 40 watt light bulb and began feeding him on a formula of condensed milk.

Early in the new year, she advertised in the local newspaper for other orphans. "George" was brought to her, followed by "Petrushka". From the diet of condensed milk, she weaned them onto fruit (bananas, peaches, plums, etc.), and her bats suddenly stopped growing. Suspecting that their diet was protein deficient, she had her answer as the bats "nearly knocked her over" when she offered them a carton of fruit yogurt.

Helen George now takes in between 10 and 20 orphaned flying foxes each year. Peter was released into the wild, but the longest he has been away is 10 weeks. Once, after an absence, he flew into a low bush at a school about two miles from George's home. She was called by the school to "come get a sick bat". "When I arrived," she said, "the bat wasn't sick! It was Peter, and he was simply overjoyed to see me, shrieking, screaming and carrying on. He climbed into my arms and made a 'purring' noise." In excellent condition, Peter, apparently, was lonely for people. George states that all her flying foxes have long memories and can identify individuals by voice alone even after a year of absence.

In Brisbane, Helen Luckoff also hand raises orphaned flying foxes. She has a large divided walk-in cage in which she keeps the bats. As they grow older, the door on one side of the cage is left open at night to encourage them to go out to feed in the wild. Remarkably, the adults often remain tame after months or even years in the wild. During Dr. Merlin Tuttle's recent trip to Australia, he was able to photograph some of Luckoff's flying foxes who, now living in the wild, had come back to visit. In anticipation of Dr. Tuttle's arrival, she had closed the cage doors as they returned over a period of several weeks. Dr. Tuttle reported that when one of the bats occasionally would become tired of being photographed, all Luckoff had to do was cradle the bat, softly singing to it while it fell asleep. After a brief

nap, the bat would be ready to cooperate again.

Both women are active in bat conservation work in Australia, using their orphans to educate school children and many others about the values of flying foxes. A BCI member, Helen George is also a prominent member of the Ku-ring-gai Bat Colony Committee who, with BCI's help, successfully fought to protect Gordon's Grey-headed Flying Fox maternity colony from elimination through subdivision development.



Helen George with Peter, her pet Grey-headed Flying Fox, and other members of her menagerie.



*Above:
Helen Luckoff poses with an orphaned baby Grey-headed Flying Fox.*

*Below:
Sarah, an orphaned six-week old Grey-headed Flying Fox, uses a towel as a pacifier.*

Photos by Dr. Merlin Tuttle

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