

Australia's Flying Foxes Still Need Help

The Ku-ring-gai Bat Colony Committee in New South Wales, Australia reports that "the battle to look after flying foxes in Australia is a long way from over." Even though flying foxes are legally protected in N.S.W. (BATS, March 1986), more public education is needed before they can be considered truly protected. Such is the case at Bellingen Island.

The river island's rain forest is one of the few remnants of lowland sub-tropical forest in northern N.S.W. Surrounded by the town of Bellingen, it is now remote from much of the fauna and flora with which it interacted prior to human settlement; even then, such a forest was rare at that latitude.

As both cattle and people encroached upon it, weeds were introduced. A South American native, Wandering Jew (*Tradescantia albiflora*), spelled doom with its gradual smothering effect, forming dense mats beneath which native seeds cannot germinate. While entire regenerative cycles were disrupted, big trees aged, succumbing to disease and decay. Old weak trees fell, opening large gaps in the forest. With no new seedlings to repair the damage, the Madeira Vine (*Andredera cordifolia*), another South American native, took over the exposed understory, further impeding regeneration. Only a circle of trees now survives.

In recent years, flying foxes found the increasing number of sun-warmed gaps one of the few places left ideally suited for them. During the warm season from September to May, this habitat is now one of the last major breeding sites of the Grey-headed Flying Fox (*Pteropus poliocephalus*) in N.S.W.

Since the settlement of Europeans in Australia only 200 years ago, flying foxes have suffered continual disturbance. Losing much of their original habitat when forests were cleared for agriculture, they were then shot as crop pests.

The primary diet of Australia's flying foxes consists of blossoms and nectar, but they also eat fruits and thus disperse many small-seeded rain forest species. They are primary pollinators for many of Australia's hardwood trees, some of which, including the abundant eucalypts, might not survive without their services. Unless natural food is scarce, flying foxes do not normally eat commercially harvestable fruit, but the irregular nature of their primary food supply occasionally leads some to raid orchards. With more native forests replaced by orchards in recent years, the problem has increased, especially where groves have been cleared out of rain forests. Recently, droughts and resultant brush fires have driven bats long distances in search of food and suitable habitat. Even so, government investigations indicate that the extent of the damage is often greatly exaggerated.

In Bellingen, pressure is now being levied on the Shire Council to rid the island of flying foxes. Fruit growers claim the bats are causing crop damage, and nearby residents complain about noise and odor. Newspaper editorials have fueled the issue by claiming that the bats are destroying the remaining rain forest and blaming them for the introduction of exotic weeds.

Although the New South Wales government protected four species of flying foxes in that

state in December 1985, the legislation is subject to review at the end of three years, and the bats may be declared locally unprotected where considered necessary. Under the legislation, farmers who document flying fox damage to their orchards already can obtain special permits to deal with specific cases, a system by which legitimate problems can be identified, studied, and eventually solved.

The flying foxes on Bellingen Island are a symptom, not the cause of degeneration of the island's rain forest. The bats arrived at the end of a long period of deterioration and after loss of other suitable breeding habitats. Restoration of the rain forest is already underway, and small areas are now recovering. The bats are insignificant introducers of weeds, and restoration is not hampered by their presence.

Nancy Pallin, Honorary Secretary of the Ku-ring-gai Bat Colony Committee, states: "Yes, there is the usual superficial damage to the higher branches of trees, which are heavily used by the bats. But since a volunteer team of dedicated bush regenerators have cut the exotic vines, the new growth on these trees is very noticeable. If the people of Bellingen understood the biology of flying foxes and their value as seed dispersers and pollinators, they would find it easier to live near them. This has already happened to some extent in Sydney around the colony at Gordon [Ku-ring-gai]." Pallin also reports that recent trials with netting, which excludes both bats and birds, indicate it to be a cost-effective method of protecting orchards.

Although fruit growers have legitimate concerns, misconceptions about flying foxes make peaceful co-existence far more difficult than necessary. Local educational efforts about the value and importance of these bats are clearly needed. Now that the bats are back in residence, letters of support to protect this maternity colony of Grey-headed Flying Foxes are needed *now*. To voice your concern, write: Mr. Gordon Braithwaite; Shire President; Bellingen Shire Council; Bellingen N.S.W. 2454; Australia.

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