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Bat-friendly fences for Australia

The past few months have been rough on flying foxes in Australia. In September, the state of Queensland reinstated fruit-growers' right to kill flying foxes, which had been prohibited as inhumane. Conservation groups, including BCI, are urging the state to reconsider. Then in October, the Tolga Bat Hospital encountered 108 little red flying foxes entangled in a 1.25-mile stretch of barbed wire fencing.

Jennefer Maclean, president of Tolga Bat Hospital, said more flying foxes are treated at the prominent bat-rescue center because of barbed wire fences than for any other any other reason. Bats and other wildlife often become hopelessly snared on the barbed wire and, unless rescued, are usually doomed to slow, painful deaths from dehydration.

The bat hospital and its partners launched Australia's Wildlife Friendly Fencing project in 2006 to convince landowners to replace or modify their barbed wire fences with less-lethal alternatives. BCI supported this effort with a Global Grassroots Conservation Fund grant in 2007. Wildlife Friendly Fencing has developed a range of fencing options and is making progress, but the threat is far from over.

Maclean said a resident of Tolga, in north Queensland, notified the bat hospital that about 30 flying foxes were caught on a fence along his driveway. "That sounded bad," she recalled, "but little did we realize the full magnitude of the problem. More than 30 bats were rescued before we even reached this man's driveway."

It took all day for two bat hospital staff members to remove all these bats. And the longer the bats had to wait for rescue, the worse they fared as they suffered increasing injuries in their long, futile struggle to escape.

Twenty of the rescued flying foxes were so badly injured that they had to be euthanized. But about 90 percent of the others will be releasable after being treated for injuries. The usual releasable rate is closer to 50 percent.

The flying foxes were nearly all juveniles returning early in the morning to their camp (or roost) at Tolga Scrub. It was extremely windy that morning, and the inexperienced youngsters would have been flying low as they tried to escape the wind.

Tolga Scrub is a small forest fragment, about 65 acres [26 hectares], that hosts many little red flying foxes at this time of year. These bats feed primarily on nectar and arrive at Tolga as the flowers blossom. Encounters with barbed wire are common, and Maclean encourages the public to contact the bat hospital rather than try to remove entangled bats themselves.

More than 85 percent of trapped animals are snagged on the top strand, Maclean said. Wildlife Friendly Fencing recommends using non-barbed wire or other material at the top of the fence, especially where flying foxes are common. However, she notes, "many cattle people are resistant to this idea." Another approach is make fences more visible for nocturnal animals, although that would be less effective in windy conditions.

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A little red flying fox (Pteropus scapulatus). Photo courtesy of Ashleigh Johnson, Tolga Bat Hospital.

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