

Relocating Flying-foxes from the Royal Botanic Gardens



March 2003

Fact Sheet

Flying-foxes in Melbourne

Grey-headed Flying-foxes, sometimes called “fruit bats”, are large bats that are native to Australia. Flying-foxes are intelligent, social animals that roost together at a “camp” during the day, but feed individually or in small groups at night.

Over 28,000 Grey-headed Flying-foxes reside in the Heritage-listed Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne and their sheer weight of numbers is damaging historically significant trees, plantings and, in turn, their habitat.

Despite a wide variety of attempts to discourage flying-foxes from roosting at the Gardens, the numbers have been steadily increasing each year since the early 1980s.

The Department of Sustainability and Environment, Department of Primary Industries, Zoos Victoria, Parks Victoria and the Royal Botanic Gardens are currently implementing a world-first three-year trial to relocate the large colony of Grey-headed Flying-foxes from the Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne to a new roost site at Horseshoe Bend in Ivanhoe.

To date, the project team has completed works at the Horseshoe Bend site to make it an attractive alternative roosting place for the flying-foxes. This has included enclosures to house captive flying-foxes, free-feed, habitat improvements and an irrigation system to maintain a humid environment, leaf litter from the Royal Botanical Gardens, play-back calls, artificial roosts and decoy flying-foxes, all to provide familiar sights, smells and sounds.

DEPARTMENT OF SUSTAINABILITY AND ENVIRONMENT

Relocating flying-foxes

In the Royal Botanic Gardens, the concentration of large numbers of animals into a small area has resulted in varying levels of damage to plants, the most severe of which is seen in Fern Gully where several trees have died and many others show signs of damage. The impact of the flying-foxes on the Gardens is not sustainable and could threaten the future of some of the plantings which can not be easily replaced. The Gardens can be protected by reducing the density of flying-foxes that roost there.

A number of techniques will be used to encourage the flying-foxes to leave the Gardens. Typically, flying-foxes dislike sudden, loud noises or fast-moving objects near them. So, most of the dispersal techniques used in the Gardens will involve noise (eg. banging on sheet metal, air horns, track and field starters' pistols, recorded noises) and movement (eg. flags on the ends of long bamboo poles, large helium balloons).

When dispersed, the flying-foxes will leave and may not return as long as the disturbance continues.

Disturbance has been designed to protect the welfare of the flying-foxes and to have minimal impact on visitors. Noises, flags and other visual effects being used in the disturbance program have been scientifically tested and meet health and safety requirements.

There may be a number of attempts to move the majority of flying-foxes from the Gardens. The first attempt will occur over a one-to-two week period, in March 2003. Dispersal efforts will take place twice per day: at dusk, just before flying-foxes leave to feed throughout the suburbs of Melbourne; and, dawn, when flying-foxes are returning to the Gardens to roost during the day. Each effort to move the flying-foxes will last for approximately 30-45 minutes.

Once they have been relocated, an ongoing program will be required to keep the numbers in the Gardens at a manageable level.

Living near flying-foxes

Although it is normal for flying-foxes to feed in residential backyards and parks at night, they rarely roost there during the day. However, if a flying-fox decides to roost in a yard during the dispersal program, it should not be disturbed, as it may move into an adjoining property. Residential yards don't make comfortable roost sites and it's likely that any flying-foxes will leave that night or after several days.

There is no need to notify the Department about the presence of a flying-fox in a backyard, as it will more than likely move off after a day or two. In the event that a flying-fox remains during the day for more than a week, or if more than 50 flying-foxes are roosting during daylight in a yard, call the Department of Sustainability and Environment Customer Service Centre on **136 186**.

Flying-foxes – important information

Like any wild animal, flying-foxes may carry disease. There is little or no danger from flying-foxes if they are observed from a distance and not handled.

A very small percentage of flying-foxes can carry the Australian Bat Lyssavirus (ABL), which can be transmitted in flying-fox saliva if bitten or scratched. There have been no reports of related illness in Victoria. Contact with flying-foxes should be avoided to minimise exposure to ABL.

If bitten or scratched by a flying-fox, the area must be washed with soap and water for at least five minutes. A medical practitioner should be consulted for advice and possible immunisation.

Pets

It is unusual for pets, like dogs and cats, to catch flying-foxes. Studies performed by the Australian Animal Health Laboratory and the absence of reported ABL infection in terrestrial animals suggest that risk to pets is very low. However if a pet captures a flying-fox, you should avoid handling the flying-fox and consult a vet.

Vaccinations

Pre-exposure vaccination, as a precaution against ABL, is only recommended for people who come into regular contact with flying foxes, such as flying-fox carers, handlers, researchers and students, vets, their assistants and vet lab staff, wildlife officers, power-line workers who frequently remove flying-foxes from power-lines

Further information

For further information about relocating Melbourne's flying-foxes or flying-foxes in general, contact the Department of Sustainability and Environment Customer Service Centre on **136 186** or visit the Department's website: **www.nre.vic.gov.au**

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For more information about DSE on the Internet, visit www.nre.vic.gov.au or call the Customer Service Centre 136 186.

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