

THE BIG PICTURE
DOUG GIMESY

FLY BY NIGHT

Going into bat for Australia's flying foxes.

FLYING FOXES CAN TRAVEL 40KM IN ONE NIGHT.

SOMETHING EXTRAORDINARY HAPPENS as soon as the sun sets across Australia. Thousands of flying foxes begin their nightly exodus. With their incredible one-metre wing spans, these megabats take flight in search of food, mainly pollen and nectar from flowering eucalypts and banksias.

During summer, up to 50,000 grey-headed flying foxes roam the night skies of Melbourne. Some colonies are more than 100 years old; the largest roosts at Yarra Bend Park, where they are looked after by park ranger Stephen Brend.

"When we say roost, it's where they sleep during the day and not where they eat – they eat all over the city," says Brend. "They'll literally fly 360 degrees around Melbourne."

Photographer Doug Gimesy has spent two years documenting the lives and struggles of these pixie-faced animals in an award-winning series. They are highly social – "a bit like people," says Brend. "The [national population] all intermingle and the bats are like a big wave, so when there's lots in Melbourne there are very few in Queensland, and when numbers diminish in Victoria they are going farther north. Waves of them wash over our big country."

This wave is vital to Australia's biodiversity. Often called nocturnal bees, flying foxes are essential cross-pollinators, and also effective seed dispersers. But despite their importance in maintaining Australia's ecological health, they have a poor reputation. And they are listed as a vulnerable species.

Habitat destruction since European settlement, responsible for the loss of at least 90 per cent of all grey-headed flying foxes, has increasingly forced them into urban areas, annoying green thumbs who often find them in their backyard grazing on fruit trees. They are also unfairly demonised as a carrier of rabies and the Hendra virus. An unsavoury association with Count Dracula also doesn't help.

"For some reason, rats, mice, snakes, spiders and bats get lumped into the basket of 'urrrgh!' And it's not fair and it's not true," says Brend. "[The flying fox] is a very sweet little thing."

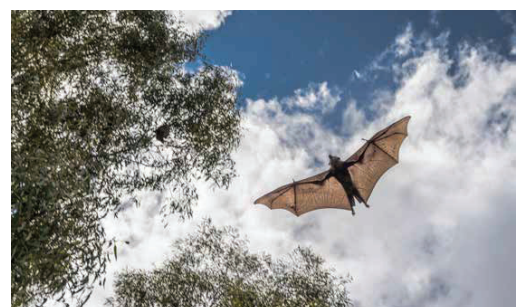
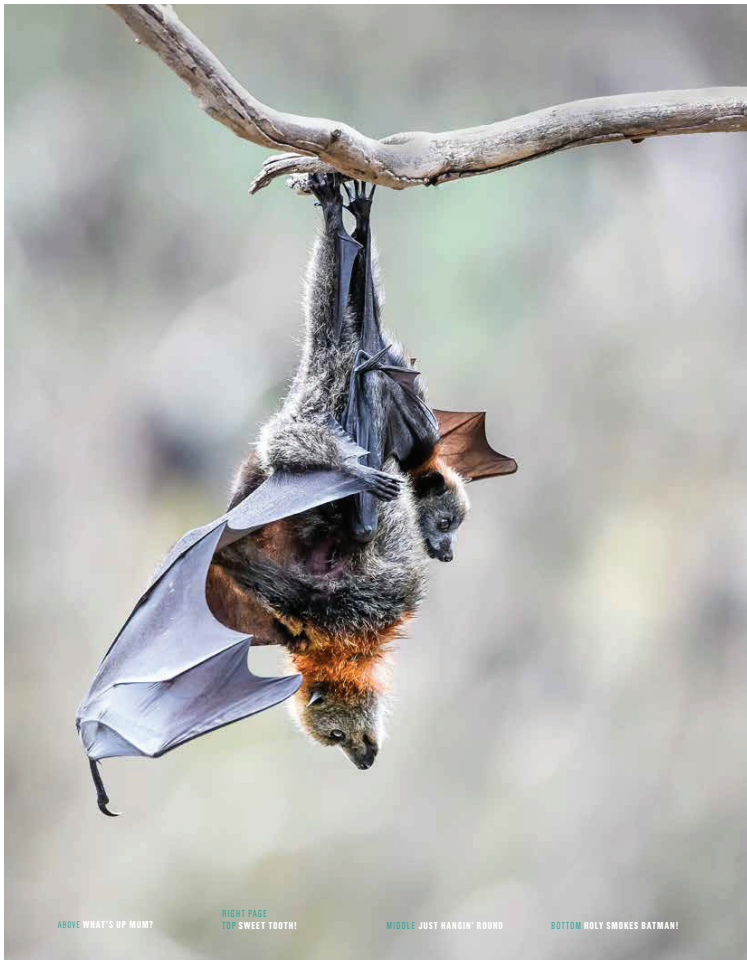
But perhaps the biggest threat to the flying fox is global warming. Extreme temperatures have been responsible for a number of large bat die-offs; a heatwave in far north Queensland late last year killed a third of all spectacled flying foxes.

"They have always suffered in the heat. There are very early records about the bats dying on these really hot days. It's not a new phenomenon, but the threat of climate change will increase the number of these terrible heat days. Eighty per cent of babies are born in October but if you have one of those crippling hot days in December you could almost wipe out all the babies from that year," says Brend.

"Flying foxes are one of the canaries in the coal mine for climate change, but sadly I think a lot of species can claim to be that."

by **Anastasia Saffolcas** (@Anast), Contributing Editor
» More photography from Doug Gimesy at gimesy.com.

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ABOVE WHAT'S UP MOM?

RIGHT PAGE
TOP SWEET TOOTH!

MIDDLE JUST HANGIN' ROUND

BOTTOM HOLY SMOKES BATMAN!