

# Helping flying-foxes in emergencies

The Department of Planning, Industry and Environment works with the community and wildlife rehabilitation groups to rescue and care for injured and distressed flying-foxes in an emergency. Emergency situations for flying-foxes include:

- **starvation events** – low availability of native nectar sources caused by habitat destruction, drought or bushfires can significantly impact vulnerable flying-foxes such as pups and nursing mothers, and may also impact reproduction rates
- **heat stress** – extreme heatwave conditions may result in significant numbers in a camp dying from overheating or dehydration.

During an emergency, government staff and licensed wildlife rehabilitators prioritise effort by focussing on the rescue of injured animals and assisting animals in distress. It is difficult to fully assess the impact on flying-fox populations until after the crisis has passed.

## Forests need flying-foxes

Flying-foxes play an important role in the survival and regeneration of our native forests. During the day flying-foxes roost on branches in large groups called camps, or sometimes individually. At dusk, they fly long distances in search of food and return at dawn. They pollinate flowers as they forage for nectar, like bees, and disperse seeds as they feed on native fruits, like birds, but over a greater distance than any bee or bird. Any decline in the number of flying-foxes is likely to reduce pollination and seed dispersal within our native forests.

## If you find an injured or distressed flying-fox

Never touch a flying-fox, even if you find one caught on barbed-wire, fruit netting, exotic vegetation, or on the ground or away from its camp. It may be injured, sick or weakened and malnourished from starvation. Call [a licensed wildlife rescue and rehabilitation provider](#) or use the [IFAW \(International Fund for Animal Welfare\) Wildlife Rescue App](#) to quickly find the closest licensed carer to contact. Those trained in flying-fox rescue and rehabilitation can assess the animal and take them into care. Remember:

- Handling of flying-foxes should only be attempted by licensed wildlife carers who are trained, vaccinated for Australian bat lyssavirus and wearing protective gear. If there is no physical contact, then there is no risk of contracting Australian bat lyssavirus.
- If an injured flying-fox needs protection, approach the animal slowly and cover with a large towel or large box. Then keep your distance. Minimise noise and fast movements, keep pets and children away so the flying-fox does not try to take flight and expend unnecessary energy or harm itself more.
- If bitten or scratched, wash the wound immediately with soap and water for at least five minutes, apply antiseptic such as iodine and consult a doctor as soon as possible. For more information see the [Australian bat lyssavirus infection fact sheet](#) on NSW Health website.

## Providing food in your backyard

When nectar and fruit are scarce over a large area, starving flying-foxes may stay close to a food source they have found, rather than return to the camp. During these times many flying-foxes may roost in gardens and street trees where they are not usually seen.

One of the best ways to feed starving flying-foxes is to selectively remove netting from fruit or flowering native trees on your property. You can use fine mesh bags to protect select bunches of fruit or branches. Use wildlife-friendly netting. Only use netting that you cannot poke your finger through to avoid trapping flying-foxes and other animals.

Seek advice from your local licensed wildlife rescue and rehabilitation provider before offering table fruit to flying-foxes. Be aware that leaving food out for flying-foxes may cause conflict between you and your neighbours. If advised by a licensed wildlife carer that it is appropriate to offer food to flying-foxes:

- Prepare a small quantity of fresh cored apple, pear or melon, such as rockmelon, with the seeds removed. Never feed them rotten fruit, meat, bread, vegetables, citrus or sugary foods.
- Thread the fruit on a piece of wire with ends joined to make a garland. Tape the join so there are no sharp edges to cause damage to their delicate wings as they move about.
- Secure the garland on a tree, at least two metres from the ground to reduce the risk of contact between flying-foxes and your family or pets.
- Replace fruit regularly. Remove uneaten and fly-blown fruit as this may cause disease.
- Remove the wire when the emergency has passed and there is no need to leave food out.

## Providing drinking water in your backyard

Flying-foxes usually obtain water by skimming the surface of a water body to wet their underside and then lap it off their fur. Placing water containers in or near camps is unlikely to assist the colony. However, if you do have flying-foxes in your backyard you can help by giving them a safe supply of clean water in a container secured in a tree. Where practical, water should be changed daily to prevent the spread of disease. Never add electrolytes or sugar to the water as it can be harmful. For more information see Helping wildlife in emergencies.

## Report heat stress in camps

During heat waves, flying-foxes may suffer from heat stress when their internal body temperatures climb to critical levels. This can be fatal and result in mass casualties at affected camps. If you see flying-foxes panting or climbing down the roost tree towards the ground, immediately contact a licensed wildlife rescue and rehabilitation provider. They can assess the situation and assist animals as required. Leave it to the experts. Assisting heat-affected flying-foxes requires experienced and licensed wildlife carers to avoid additional harm to the animals.

## Become a wildlife volunteer

Wildlife carers play a pivotal role in taking in injured flying-foxes for rehabilitation. If you want to learn more about wildlife rescue or train to become a volunteer, email your local volunteer wildlife rehabilitation organisation. Emailing keeps the phone lines free so rescue calls can be prioritised. You can also explore our National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) volunteer activities focused on wildlife. Help to protect habitat, monitor animals or conduct species surveys. Get involved in wildlife rehabilitation.

## For more information

The grey-headed flying-fox is a threatened species in New South Wales. Learn more about the conservation of flying-foxes through the Saving our Species program.

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