

The great bat bungle

Shifting part of the flying fox population from a Melbourne landmark could end up driving some people batty. **Ewin Hannan reports.**

Three weeks after they were sent packing from Melbourne's Royal Botanic Gardens, 20,000 bats remain missing in action. Over the past fortnight, thousands of the former 28,000-strong colony have moved into the Fitzroy Gardens, creating a huge racket as they settled in historic trees around Captain Cook's cottage Council Pavilion restaurant.

The Melbourne City Council was not impressed. Sustainability from the Victorian Department of Sustainability and Environment were in the gardens before dawn every day last week trying to get the bats to move on. Meanwhile, the flying fox population in Geelong has ballooned from 50 to 2500 in a few weeks. And, across Melbourne's suburbs, residents are reporting nightly bat visits. A small number have been seen even in Albury.

As for the rest? "We're missing about 20,000," says Lawrence Pope, president of the Victorian Animal Welfare Association. "We don't know where they have gone."

Robert Begg, the department's acting director of flora and fauna, thinks the bats have gone north for the winter — in autumn. "Instead of going north in May, they have gone in April," he says.

So far, only a handful have moved permanently to where the department wants them to go: a specially prepared site at Horseshoe Bend in Ivanhoe. But hundreds do regularly pop in there for a free feed — and to rub, smell and lick the plastic decoy bats put there to attract them. Last year, about 90 bats, including 26 pregnant females, were placed in three cages at the site.

"Only a small number are roosting there, including some of the juveniles who were born there," Begg says.

Philip Moors, director of the Royal Botanic Gardens, is happy the strategy of blasting the bats from their former Fern Gully bunker appears to have worked. He hopes they will move progressively along the

Yarra. Does he know where the rest are? "No," he says. "We don't. They are not about."

Sending the bats to leafy Ivanhoe was not the Bracks Government's first option. Initially, Labor decided the bats should be re-located to Dowell Creek, near Mallacoota.

Two years ago, Moors fronted a public meeting there to discuss the plan. According to Gippsland East MP, Craig Ingram, Moor's pitch failed to inspire the locals. "(Moors) said, 'this is not a meeting, where we give you feedback, we are telling you this needs to be done and how it's going to be done,'" Ingram says.

"It was ugly and rightly so. Here was this cafe-latte-sipping toff with his high-paid public relations consultant and flash videos telling us poor country souls why this was going to be good for us. It went down like a lead balloon ... Even the department and Parks Victoria boys were saying, 'these blokes are gooses'."

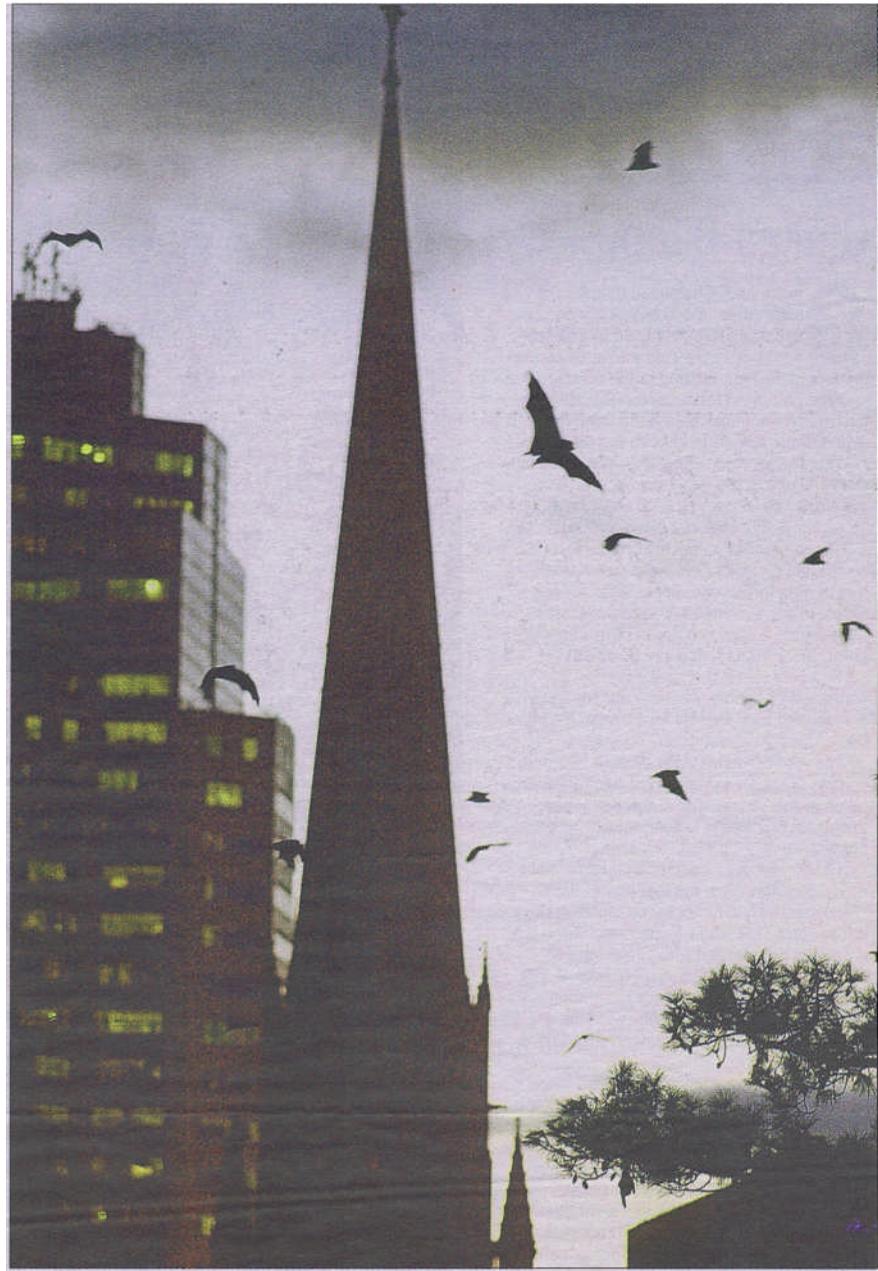
Moors remembers things differently. "I would not have recalled it in that context," he says. "In any case, the decision about moving the flying foxes was the department's call. It's two years down the track. If that's the way Craig wants to represent it ... he has got a local constituency."

Despite residential hostility, Ingram says Mallacoota residents were prepared to support a trial re-location. But, in March 2001, then environment minister, Sherryl Garbutt, called it off, citing "excessive costs, concerns from the local community regarding the impact of bats on the area, and doubt among scientists of the likelihood of success".

"We just about had a solution," Ingram says. "It was a trial. We had a way forward. But ... when we got the press release blaming the people of Mallacoota, there were people who were pretty upset about that. The government made the decision not because the community didn't want them, but because it was going to cost too much. It was going to cost \$1000 to \$2000 a bat."

After abandoning the Mallacoota option, the government authorised the culling of thousands of bats, arguing that it was required to limit damage to the Botanic Gardens.

Animal liberationists were furious and threatened to cut



down a tree for every bat killed. Begg says because of these threats, the department (even 18 months later) will not disclose the number of animals killed.

He is also circumspect about the amount of taxpayers' funds allocated to this world-first bat-diversion program. Begg admits the cost could be about \$1 million, but says he cannot be precise. It is mid-morning at the Fitzroy Gardens. The Pavilion restaurant is doing a steady trade. Patrons are attracted by the serenity, but today it is a cacophony. About 5000 bats fill the trees, hanging off branches, and littering the sky. Tourists look up, pointing their cameras.

"They chatter a lot," says Pope. "ik lot of what you're hearing is requests for sex by the males. They get lots of

knock-backs. The cack cack cack sound you hear, that's the female saying, 'bugger off.'"

When *The Age* spoke to Pope, he was unimpressed by the department's strategy to move the bats on. At 4.30am each day, Volunteers assist department officers who use computer-generated sound buggies to try and scare the bats out of the gardens. The machines are so loud that ear-plugs and earmuffs are worn. The tactic is repeated at 6pm.

"To keep them out the gardens, they are going to have to keep tormenting them,"

The cack cack cack sound you hear, that's the female saying, 'bugger off. LAWRENCE POPE

Pope says. "It's just stupid. It's *Alice in Wonderland* stuff. I have been down the Yarra over the past week. There is not one roosting there. They cannot be herded. They are not cattle. It's like trying to herd cats."

But later, after further talks with Begg, Pope is more upbeat. "I think the department acknowledged it would be barbarous to use heavy-handed dispersal methods on bats that are breeding and nurturing," he says.

"I am cautiously optimistic. I am little more hopeful. What was needed were clearer lines of communication between the department and stakeholders."

City of Melbourne council

lor Kate Redwood says the council remains very concerned at the potential damage to the historic gardens. "It's like friends who come to stay," she says. "As long as they don't stay too long."

"It's a concern both in terms of highly valued and matured trees. It's a concern in terms of cost. It's a concern that some people find them messy and smelly. There are some people concerned at their potential to cause disease."

The department had hoped the bats would be forced out of the Fitzroy Gardens by Monday last week. It didn't happen, and departmental officers and volunteers have been working feverishly to have them move on over the Easter period.

"I think, in fact, it's gone fairly well to date in terms of the dispersal process," Begg says. "To expect them to go at all from the (Botanic Gardens) was a pretty big ask."

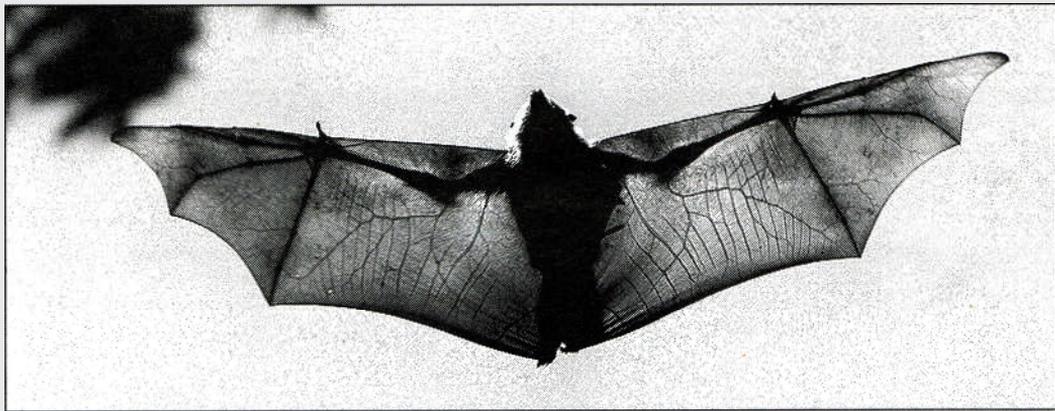
Begg says the department had no idea thousands of bats would flee to Geelong. "That was totally unexpected. We didn't have a clue they would go there." The key to success, he says, is building up a "critical mass" of bats at an appropriate site. The plan is to progressively entice them up the Yarra in the hope they settle at Horseshoe Bend. "If we can just engage 500 or 1000, the others will follow," he says.

But Ingram remains sceptical. "The whole thing has been a debacle," he says. "That's the only way to describe it."

ABOVE: Bats in the belfry? St Patrick's forms a backdrop for bats arriving at Fitzroy Gardens. Below: Bats in the gardens; and activist Lawrence Pope. PICTURES: SIMON SCHLUTER



Noisy, smelly and a plague on our gardens



Incoming: a grey-headed flying fox at the Royal Botanic Gardens.

I HAVE kept quiet during I this ridiculous bat debate, but not any more.

They are noisy and smelly and are now attacking the Fitzroy Gardens as well as the Royal Botanic Gardens and the Geelong Botanic Gardens.

Take a real, overall look at what is happening. They are damaging everything, particularly the young shoots of the trees, and frightening the usual feathered inhabitants.

Gone are the days of a quiet walk and a cup of coffee in the Fitzroy Gardens accompanied by the delightful chirp and song of the birds which used to predominate.

Help! Serious culling is the only way to maintain a balance.
Diana Jones, Kew

I ENDORSE Peter Charmicheal's comments on the bats (April 14), but they have taken up residence in their thousands in the Fitzroy Gardens.

Each morning this residential area is rudely awakened by loud banging and pistol-shooting, beginning at 5.25a in the gardens, to supposedly frighten away the bats.

Four major hospitals adjoin



So Many: roosting bats.

these gardens. Staff, patients and hospital visitors used to rest in the gardens before returning to the hospitals.

The stench — "bat poo" covers paths, seats and lawns — as well as fresh, leaves and twigs shed from bats is carried into these hospitals.

What fumigating procedures are in place?

Hundreds of office workers used to eat their lunch in these gardens. What procedures are in place to prevent the dis-

eased dust motes collected by these workers from entering the air-conditioning plants?

I find it fascinating that whenever a "plague" emerges in a city the scientists try to trace its origins back to insects (SARS and cockroaches) or animals (AIDS and monkeys).

I wonder how long it will be before someone is infected by the bats.

Who is more important, people or bats?

These gardens are also used for weddings and are a national treasure —but not for much longer.

Lynette Young, East Melbourne

PETER Charmicheal's inference that Melbourne has a population of 250,000 bats is absurd.

The national population of grey-headed flying foxes is about 250,000 and falling.

After dispersal by the Department of Environment and Sustainability, Melbourne's bat population is between 3000 and 5000.

Lawrence Pope, president, Victorian Animal Welfare Association

Mayor takes a swipe at bats

CHRIS TINKLER

Urban affairs reporter

FITZROY Gardens is under attack from bats that are threatening to destroy 120 of the oldest elm trees in Melbourne.

Lord Mayor John So is calling for an urgent review of the State Government strategy to control flying foxes, saying a cull could be necessary.

His call comes as it emerged that efforts to drive away the Fitzroy Gardens bat colony — now 5000-strong and growing — were suspended four weeks ago.

Melbourne City Council was advised by the Government that the program was suspended due to resource issues, Cr So said.

Council inspections have revealed about 200 trees in the historic Fitzroy Gardens — including 120 elms valued at \$10 million — are now under threat.

There were fears of a heritage disaster in one of Melbourne's major tourist destinations, which boasts Captain Cook's Cottage among its attractions, Cr So said.

Despite writing to Environment Minister John Thwaites requesting an urgent meeting on the crisis two weeks ago, Cr So said he was still waiting for a response.

The State Government launched a strategy in March to move 28,000 bats out of the Royal Botanic Gardens to a custom-made sanctuary in Ivanhoe.

But most of the bats have settled in Fitzroy Gardens, the Domain Gardens, Geelong's Eastern Gardens and other parks across the state.

"The bats are out of control and they are de-



Pests: Bats are taking Over Fitzroy Gardens

stroying our heritage gardens which took years to establish," Cr So said.

"They are not appealing at all — unless we want Melbourne to be known as the bat city.

"What they (gardens staff) are doing is not working. It is not effective. They stir them and then they (the bats) come back.

"They have become a pest. It's no different than if you have rats or cockroaches running around. You have to control it.

"People need to understand it is a question of whether we want our gardens or not. The breeding season is coming in August, you can imagine how they will multiply.

"Culling has to be one option on the agenda.

"They've tried and failed to relocate them, therefore we have to find better ways. I have no difficulty with culling them."

Cr So ruled out one proposal of fencing off sections of the gardens to protect tourists and Melbourne residents from the bats, saying it was not a solution.

But the State Government yesterday stood firm against a cull and said the disturbance program would resume in the next few weeks.



Killer colony on move: bats infesting trees in Fitzroy Gardens yesterday. Picture: BILL MCAULEY

City blames state for bats

MELBOURNE City Council has told the State Government to clean up its own mess by ridding public gardens of fruit bats.

Thousands of grey-headed flying foxes have been driven out of the Royal Botanic Gardens only to find homes in nearby parks.

A program to move the bats out of Fitzroy Gardens was stopped last month, leading to a renewed infestation of the destructive animals.

Flying fox numbers peaked this year at an estimated 28,000, with huge colonies destroying valuable trees in the botanic gardens.

A plan to move the colonies to a purpose-built centre at Ivanhoe has failed, with the bats moving to other reserves such as the Fitzroy, Domain and Geelong botanic gardens.

**By DANNY BUTTLER,
environment reporter**

Melbourne City Council said the Department of Sustainability and Environment must immediately resume the dispersal program before historic trees are destroyed.

Lord Mayor John So said moving the grey-headed flying fox from one city garden to another was not acceptable.

"You can't shift the problem a kilometre up the road and then drop the ball," he said.

"They dropped the ball in early May. They started the dispersal program in the Fitzroy Gardens and then stopped it."

Cr So said he had breakfast in the gardens yesterday and was surprised by the number of bats roosting.

"The gardens are heritage listed," he said.

"There's about 120 elm trees each with a value of around \$100,000. It's a significant part of Melbourne's heritage and we want it protected," he said.

"It's a problem of the State Government's making, so we would look to them to make it right."

A government spokeswoman yesterday said the dispersal program was scheduled to restart tomorrow.

She said the Government was eager to work with Melbourne City Council to protect its parks and gardens.

Bats are dispersed by computer generated noise simulating shotguns and other deterrents.

Flying foxes face second eviction bid

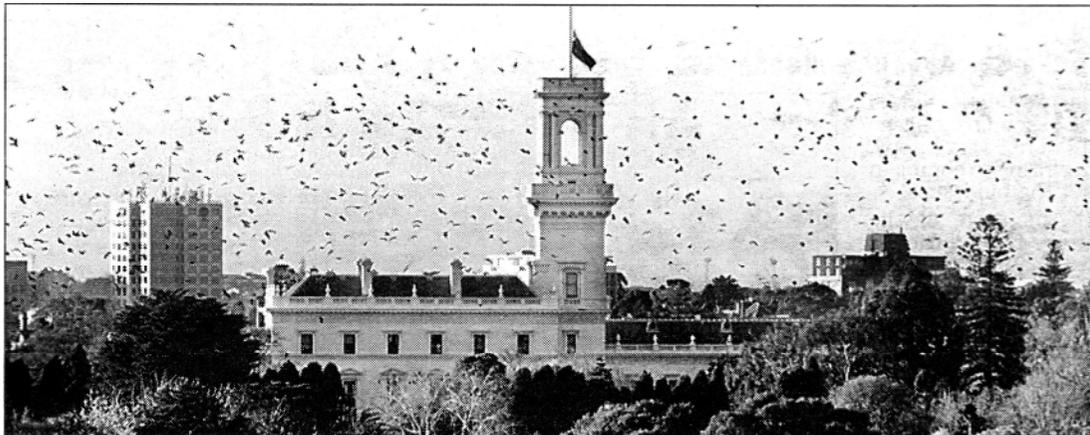
Victoria's controversial grey-headed flying foxes are to be evicted from another inner-Melbourne park. The State Government yesterday announced the relocation of thousands of the troublesome bats from the Fitzroy Gardens in East Melbourne.

Melbourne's 28,000 grey-headed flying foxes were removed from the Royal Botanic Gardens in March after damaging century-old trees. It was hoped the bats would move to a decoy bat camp on the Yarra River in Ivanhoe, but thousands flew instead to the Fitzroy Gardens. The second relocation, starting tomorrow, will again use noise to move the bats. Department of Sustainability and Environment acting director (flora and fauna) Robert Begg said the Fitzroy Gardens were inappropriate for the bats in the long term.

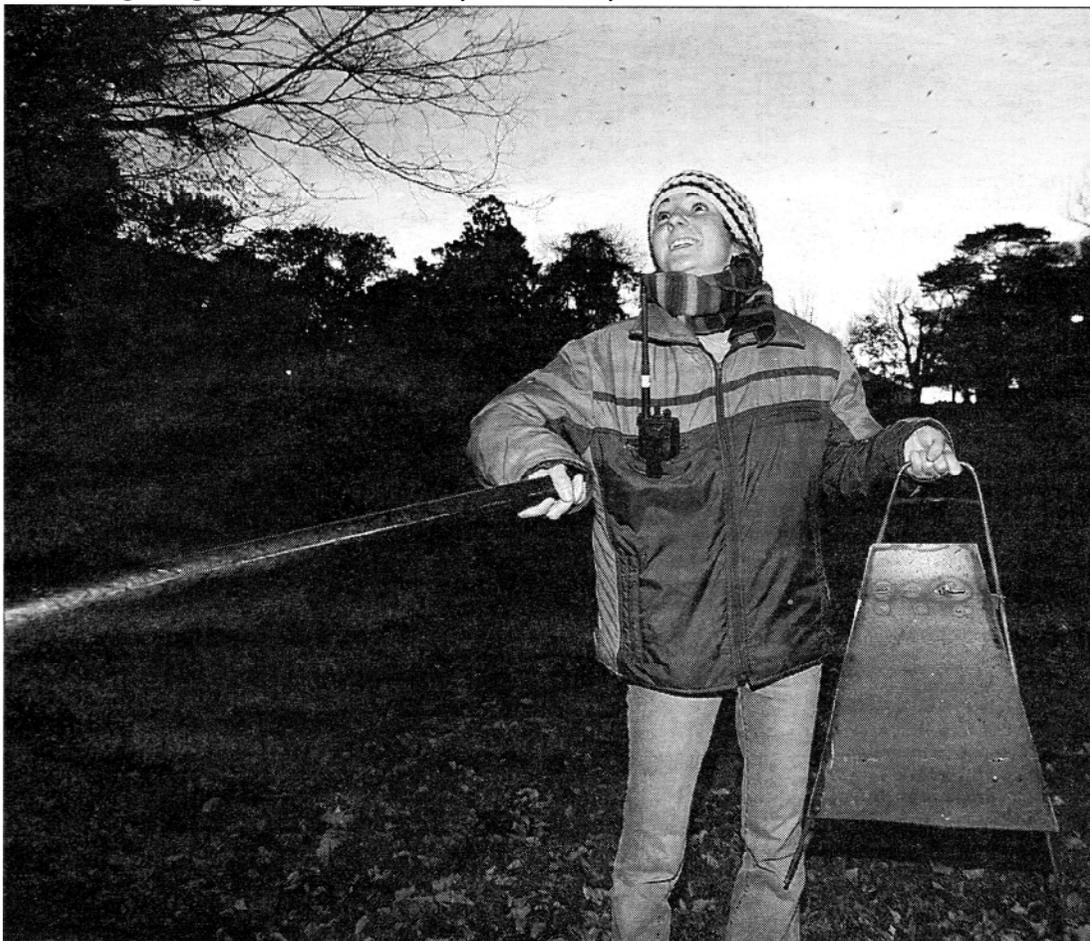


Council driven batty

Compensation bid for garden damage



Night flight: bats are driven away from the Royal Botanic Gardens. Pictures: MARK SMITH



Making a big din: Kylie Climson helps drive the bats away with noise.

MELBOURNE City Council will seek compensation from the State Government for damage caused by the grey-headed flying fox.

MCC environment spokeswoman Kate Redwood said historic elm trees were being damaged by the estimated 6000 fruit bats wintering in the gardens.

Cr Redwood said the Government had a responsibility to compensate the council for damage caused by the bats.

"We were getting really quite concerned about tree damage in the Fitzroy Gardens," she said.

"Council is monitoring this issue closely and is taking it seriously, but since we have management responsibility for the parks we felt we could not just sit on our hands and complain."

Thousands of the fruit bats have been nesting in Fitzroy Gardens since being driven out of the Royal Botanic Gardens this year.

By DANNY BUTTLER, environment reporter

Other colonies have recently moved to botanic gardens in Geelong and Warrnambool.

Department of Sustainability and Environment acting director of flora and fauna Robert Begg said compensation was not an issue.

"I couldn't see why there would be any need. It's a community problem — it's the community which has to deal with it," he said.

"I'd say (there is) minimal damage to the Fitzroy Gardens at this stage."

Any compensation bid could escalate if the latest dispersal attempt is unsuccessful.

DSE last week started a new program to remove the bats from 20 inner-city reserves before the breeding season begins in about eight weeks.

If the fruit bats, a protected species, remain in the gardens until August the dispersal program will have to stop for several months.

"Around the start of August is when you would expect late pregnancy in females and then moving on to birth in September and October ... we've only got a limited opportunity to move them on," Dr Begg said.

He said there was a chance the bats could become fixtures in the gardens until late in the year.

"It certainly is a possibility we've considered," he said.

Warrnambool City Council is taking a low-key approach to its newly arrived flying foxes.

Environment officer Paul Gray said the council and DSE were working together to monitor the colony of about 50 bats.

"It is not known at this stage how long these animals will stay in the Warrnambool area and whether the bats were part of the Melbourne population or have moved down from New South Wales because of the drought," he said.